

Whistlers' Van

Idwal Jones

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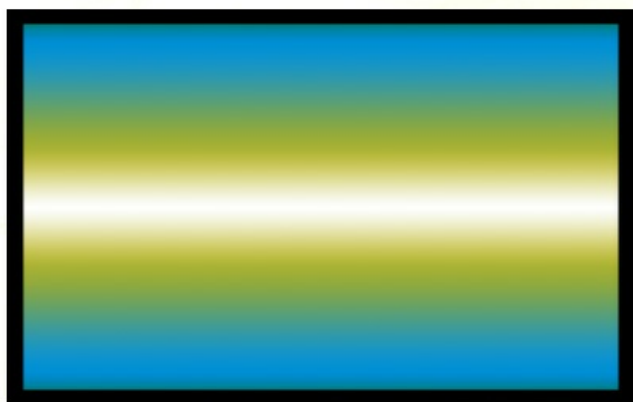
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WHISTLERS' VAN
IDWAL JONES

DRAWINGS BY ZHENYA GAY



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WHISTLERS' VAN

Gone in the Night

THE dwellers at Moor House rose early, and were ordinarily afoot long before the hares and the quail began to stir in the heather. Gwilym came from his tower room, felt his way down the landing, and pushed open the window to glance at the weather-vane atop the barn. Then he knocked at his grandfather's door and spoke his greeting:

“Good morning, Taid. It is misty, with a light wind from the east.”

Answer there was none. He knew the room was empty; that during the night his grandfather had slipped away. But it was Gwilym's secret, and he had shouted his greeting so loudly that Shan, the maid, could hear it downstairs. This secret he pondered as he descended into the huge beamed kitchen of the farmhouse, with its rushlights and the great peat fire before which she was baking cakes. She rolled out lumps of oaten dough and twirled them on her palms before the fire. As she twirled she intoned a baking song, which is the custom of folk in the Welsh highlands.

“Look you, now, Young Master,” she cried, sweeping the hearth clean with a goose-wing. “Here are thirty fine cakes—better than any in the village cookshop. You go and fetch in your Taid. It is six o'clock and he will be wanting his meal.”

The dew was heavy this morning, and Gwilym strapped on his high boots.

“He will be digging turfs in the bog,” she said. “Run now, good Little Master that you are, and tell him the kettle is boiling.”

Pushing open the gate in the wall, he went out upon the moor.

“Taid!” he shouted.

He repeated his cry until his head almost split from the noise. Not a soul was visible in this dewy, silent outer world smoking with mist. In the peat bog

where Thomas Anwyl had been digging, a spade was thrust upright, with his old hat upon it. It was very like a scarecrow, Gwilym thought; but a rook happened to be perched on the crown of the hat. Birds of every feather made Moor House farm their home, for the Anwyls shot at nothing winged, nor at any animal save the hare.

“Taid!” screeched another voice.

Myfi, his sister, had come out, with her short kirtle whipping about her knees.

“It’s no use calling,” said Gwilym. “He’s a long way off by now.”

She glanced about her, and saw that the dog-cart was gone and also Twm-Twm, the pony.

“Twm-Twm! Where is he? Shall we ever see him again?”

“Oh, yes. He’s only gone on the road.”

That night, Gwilym had been awakened by a clumping below the window, the pad of hoofs on the heather. Looking out he beheld the dog-cart, with lamps aglow, and Twm-Twm between the shafts. Then Taid appeared with a mackintosh, for a heavy dew was falling; he climbed into the seat, and drove off—drove off straight, without once looking back. He must have made up his mind suddenly, for he had said nothing about going away. And if he had wished Shan Gof to know, he would have told her, or at least left a note on the kitchen dresser.

“The Whistlers!” echoed Myfi, clutching his arm. “They have come for him!” She broke into tears, a weakness that Gwilym overlooked, because she was only eight. “Oh, we shall never see him again. Poor Twm-Twm!”

“Don’t worry about the pony. He’ll come back, as if he were a cat. Has he not been to market a hundred times?”

“Will Taid come back, too?”

“He should.”

That consoled Myfi a little.

Taid had been restless for many weeks; every day he had climbed the tower to Gwilym’s room, to throw open the window and scrutinize the vast green expanse of the moor, as if he had been expecting to see a cart come from the direction of the hills, or from the east. And who else should it be, but the Whistlers? They came every year in the spring, just about the time the elders and the plum trees began to bud. They were men, sometimes two, sometimes

three, who came in a Gipsy cart that invariably drew near the wall or the hedge around Moor House. They never spoke, but gave a low, penetrating whistle. After repeating it twice, they went away.

Taid never gave sign that he had noticed them. If he were in the peat bog or in the garden, he kept on with his task. If he were in his study, by the open window, he retained his gaze on his books, oblivious to the steady, reproachful glance of the visitors.

Only the evening before, he had asked Gwilym:

“When you came home from school, did you see anything strange?”

“No, sir.”

“When you left the village, whom did you see?”

“Dai Shepherd, and crows on the elm tree near the bridge.”

“Nobody or anything else?” asked Taid, looking out the window.

“Nothing and nobody,” answered Gwilym without looking surprised.

And now he was gone, gone hurriedly into the night—even before the Whistlers had come. Some impulse, some reason had driven him forth. But not fear. The Anwyls did not know what it was to be afraid. Gwilym’s and Myfi’s father, Captain Geoffrey Anwyl, had been killed in the War, and Taid had been a very great boxer.

“Don’t let Shan know you have been crying,” said Gwilym. “Taid has gone to the fair. That’s nothing to cry about.”

“But I couldn’t say good-bye to Twm-Twm.”

“He’ll come back, and Taid will bring you a fairing.”

The table was set for breakfast when they came in. The tea-cozy was oozing steam. Between the plate of new, golden butter and a wooden bowl of currant jam was the fresh pile of oatcake.

“Now, then, where is your Taid?” Shan girded at them.

They could avert their eyes no longer.

“He is not here,” said Gwilym. “Nor is Twm-Twm. They must have gone to the fair.”

“The fair! The fair is over—over three days ago.”

“Anyway, he is gone.”

“Blessed King!” she shouted. “I never heard of such a thing in my life. To go away like that! As if he were a Gipsy, and the constable after him!”

She went to the doorway and loudly spoke her amazement and anger to the rows of wet hollyhocks standing in the garden, then scolded as if the children were somehow to blame for his disappearance. Deaf to her clacking, Gwilym reached for a crisp, warm oatcake. Shan made a swoop and carried off the plate.

“For such a woeful day as this, last week’s bara cerch is good enough to eat.”

She took down a plateful of stale oatcake from the mantelpiece, blew off the dust and dropped it scornfully on the table. The print of butter, with its leaves and acorns, she replaced with a cup of beef dripping.

“Please don’t take away the butter,” wailed Myfi.

“Fetch the butter here,” said Gwilym.

“Eh, eh? My fine Little Master, who is the mistress of Moor House now? Who if not Shan Gof, the daughter of Thomas Blacksmith? Someone must look after Moor House, or else straight to the poorhouse you all go. And you will be orphans, indeed! Master Anwyl goes by night to a fair when there is no fair. What a madness!

“Blessed King forbid—but if Vicar Pritchard heard of it, or Elias Schoolmaster, or the other respected men of the parish, what would they think?”

“Perhaps to another fair, further away. To buy a sickle, or a new bridle for Twm-Twm,” Gwilym suggested; though he knew perfectly well that if it were just to visit a fair, Taid would not have left mysteriously in the dead of night.

“Those he could buy at the village,” cried Shan. “Fair, indeed! Why should a goodly farmer go among drunken wastrels? Oh, Little People, a great pity on you! To have a Taid that would rather sleep under a hedge like a tinker than in his bed like an honest chapel Christian!”

She clacked back and forth in wooden shoes, twisting her hands in her apron, uttering shrill laments.

“Blessed King! And not a word did he say to me! If only the constable were here, or Cadwalader Wagon-mender who can read tracks and point which way he went. Little Master, you must find the constable. The good man, he was hiding in the plum trees of White Calf farm last night to see if those Gipsies would come again. They stole two aprons and the best Sunday handkerchief of

Davies White Calf from the clothesline, and such bold rascallions they are, they will be sure to return tonight, and the little constable must lose more sleep, though he has a large family.

“What is to become of us with all these Gipsies roaming about? We shall wake up to find the teeth stolen clean out of our heads.”

Heedless of her scolding, Gwilym and Myfi ate their stale oatcakes. Shan wrapped the butter in a cabbage leaf and put it into a basket with a handful of the new cakes.

“In the village is a widow, poor soul, that would be glad of these gifts, and she shall have them.

“And now, Little Master, before you go to school, peel some more rushlights for tonight. Be careful you don’t break them for the dried sap is brittle. The more rushlights you make, the more candles we save, and the more pennies for the missionary.”

With shawl over her head, and basket slung on her arm, Shan left the house. As she went down the garden path, lightning flashed through the larches. Thunder crumpled, with a final roll so deafening that the earth rocked. Shan recoiled in terror.

“Angry is the Voice!” she cried. “God is full of wrath on the house today. The Master has gone to the fair where there is drinking and fiddle-music and fighting with the constables. Blessed King forgive us!”

Another burst of thunder smothered her plaint. She folded the shawl across her face, leaned forward against the rain and trudged under the dripping branches to the moor.

Gwilym stood at the window, watching her as she disappeared into the mist. His thought was that if the Voice was angry it was because Shan had carried off the butter. No doubt, to sell in the village for sixpence to buy herself a bottle of scent or some peppermints to nibble whilst listening to the sermon.

The wind blew still harder. Ducks’ feathers lay on the pool, as if it had just snowed. Taid’s hat came over the wall, as shapeless as a dishrag. The shovel must have been blown down. What a storm! Who would not be out on a jolly day like this?

Now he had to make rushlights. If it wasn’t rushlights, then it was spills, twisted out of strips of newspaper, to save matches. He sat before the cleared table and with his finger-nails peeled a bundle of long, needle-like rushes. Taid had a large hanging-lamp in his study, and a student’s lamp by the desk on

which he wrote. The others in the house conned books or sewed by the light of these slivers of dried pith that gave off a flame hardly larger than a bean, just as in any other Welsh farmhouse.

On the window the rain hammered steadily. The wind, after bumping against the door until it had despaired of crashing in, made a new assault down the chimney. It fanned peat smoke and dust all over the place, and Gwilym and Myfi coughed until its fury abated.

Gooseberries, whisked from the garden, drummed against the windows like hail. Clouds, shot through with lightning, lowered bulkily to the moor and released cataracts of water. The darkness was of night, and made weird by the screaming of curlews and gulls helpless in the variable wind.

Inside, it was comfortable, for the draft began to go up the chimney instead of down. The peat, composed of fern mold and brier roots, glowed as evenly as coal, with dancing gobbets of flame; the kettle on the pot-hook whistled a tune to the jiggling of the heavy lid.

Gwilym had peeled another bundle of rushes.

“Well, that’s enough,” he said. “I’ll do no more, not even if she sends me to bed in the dark.”

“She will, to save rushlights,” said Myfi. “I wish Taid was back.”

They stood looking through the window until it grew lighter and the rain ceased. The brook in the moor had overflowed its banks; shortly, after the level had fallen a bit, the fishing would be good, and the trout would snap at worms.

“Whether anybody’s home or not, I suppose I must go to school,” Gwilym sighed.

Myfi didn’t have to go; Taid gave her lessons in his study, and a holiday was now before her. Gwilym slung a strap of books over his shoulder and slouched out. With long steps, for he was tall and straight as a dart, he moved into a world of thick, swirling mist, peopled with hollyhocks and foxgloves. The world was soundless, except for the rushing of the water in the garden pool and the plunking of the last raindrops on the rhubarb leaves. Overhead marched the smoky-yellow clouds, raking the top of the larches that on these upland moors grew to an immense height. He stared upward, picking out grotesque forms in the procession—castles, witches, galleons, and oxen. He stood there, at the brow of the hill, until the mist lifted and the mountains outlined themselves at the rim of the bowl-shaped panorama.

He studied the moor road. It began at the farm, wound through the gorse,

dipped into a brier-filled combe, where there was a brook, then was lost in a wilderness of hazel-bush and rocks. It was the road to Beyond, and on bright, clear days, standing at this point, he had a glimpse of the tumbling sea.

Years before, he had traveled on it himself, coming over from the north horizon with Myfi, when Taid brought them to Moor House. He had not wandered over it since, for life had been full enough at the farm and the village. But he often came to this height to look curiously upon the road, looking at the travelers, the wagons and char-à-bancs that climbed and descended at the far distance; carrying people intent on their strange businesses so remote from life in this corner of the moors.

At times a great longing came over him, with a sting in his blood, to venture out beyond the sky-line and see things for himself, and this was the season of the year when he felt it most.

Gwilym strode on, at a lurching pace, his face darker and more thoughtful than usual. He gained the village and strode past the church with its tall spire and the tombs of black stone, on which lay the recumbent statues of knights. He gave a passing glance at the window touched by the sun. The school came next; a grimy building, as forbidding as a prison. He slid into his seat and was soon immersed in his Latin grammar.

Mr. Elias, the schoolmaster, tapped the globe with his cane.

“A dillar, a dollar, a ten o’clock scholar. Master Anwyl, what is the meaning of this tardiness?”

At the words, barked harshly through his mustache, a shudder went through the frames of the ten pupils.

“You are a quarter of an hour late, sir.”

Gwilym rose. “Then, Mr. Elias, your watch is sixteen minutes fast.”

Mr. Elias stiffened. Behind his spectacles his eyes glittered brightly cold, then he angrily pushed back his silk cap.

“Indeed!”

Though of a grim aspect, and inclined to apply his cane to the palm or the shoulders of a pupil for the least offense, he was at heart a quite harmless being. He struck lightly, for one thing. He ruled through the ferocity of his looks. He was a bachelor, and he lived by himself in the adjoining cottage, with its garden and row of bee-hives. And he was also a crony of Thomas Anwyl, with whom he smoked pipes of an evening and played at draughts.

“H’m,” he muttered, and pulled out his watch. Then he held it to his ear. “I thought so. I forgot to wind it. Master Anwyl, let me see your timepiece.”

“Sir, I haven’t one.”

“Aha! Then how should you know exactly what time it is?”

“When I came past the church, the sun was full on the transept window. That means it is just nine o’clock.”

“Indeed! Gentlemen of the class, do you hear that? That’s observation! None so blind as those that will not see. Master Anwyl, you are fortunate. You will be spared the trouble of having to wind watches, for you will not have need of them. I wish I hadn’t. ‘Fugit hora.’ Time flies. Please decline ‘mensa.’ ”

Gwilym raced through the declension.

“Bound Mesopotamia.”

“It lies between two rivers, Euphrates on the west, Tigris on the east. Those are the natural boundaries. The political ones have been changed since the War. I don’t know how much, because your globe is a very old one.”

“Well, it shows the oceans, anyway, and the Equator. That will be all, Master Anwyl.”

Gwilym resumed his seat. His lessons were over for the day, but as a matter of form he propped a geography in front of him. It was the turn of the others. The skies darkened again. An inky panoply of cloud unrolled across the heavens. Lightning rove through, glare after glare fanned into the room.

Elias Schoolmaster put a match to the lamp, and poured more coals into the grate. The pupils droned their lessons, and murmured the tables they had to learn by heart.

It was dull for Gwilym. He had stalked through all the class textbooks as easily as he stalked with his long legs ahead of his mates on the road. He had wrestled with far deeper books in his grandfather’s study, which was so full of them that there was hardly room for a chair to sit in. But since the lessons were so easy for him, it gave him an excuse to send his fancy wandering while his body stayed at the desk. School, he felt, was necessary for most people, but as for himself—

Elias Schoolmaster, who had been half dozing in his chair by the grate, stirred, announced a singing lesson and struck a tuning-fork on the table. The adolescent voices struggled with the day’s hymn:

The hymn ended in silence, the last singer only five notes behind the others.

“That wasn’t very bad,” said the master. “It wasn’t very good, neither. The fog must have got into your throats. Mud-toads and fishes never can quite get the hang of music, somehow.”

Gwilym’s eyes were on the geography, but unseeing, and he hardly even heard the voices; not even the wind that moaned at the casements and plucked handfuls of thatch from all the roofs on the street, whirling them into the air with leaves and bits of paper. His thoughts were far across the moor and on the distant road where wagons and char-à-bancs went up and down and travelers, with dreams in their breasts, toiled onward to the horizon for secret reasons of their own.

The moor road! Its lure was almost too great for him to withstand. One more term of school, and that would be enough for him. He was weary of its regulations, weary of the sing-song drone of his fellows: David Gamekeeper, Evan Blacksmith, Thomas Aleshop, Hugh Cattlebuyer, Garth Wooldealer, and the others, all known after their fathers’ trades. They had never been out of Wales. They had never even been out of the village. Nor would they ever wander elsewhere, nor stray any further—Oh, height of their dreams!—than the fair at Llangollen, or to the battlefield, if there should be another war.

He rebelled against the acrid, dusty smell of chalk, and the hard scratching of pencils on slate, that put his teeth on edge. And most of all he rebelled against having to stay where he was, at Moor House, when the wind’s call was ceaseless and the road across the moor was ever beckoning to him.

His father, because of the Gipsy strain in him, had rebelled in his time. Captain Anwyl, as a lad in this farmhouse, could never hear the clink of the tinker’s hammer in the bracken, nor see the glim of a Rommany campfire without leaving his meal or hurling aside his book to be lost for an hour. More than once he had been lost for a month.

“I should give you a trouncing,” Taid used to say to the returned nomad, who showed up tanned, smiling, unrepentant.

“What do you mean by bolting off like that? It’s a scandal. Most lads would have got a sound birching for it. We hadn’t an idea where you were. Couldn’t you have mailed a postcard, at least?”

“Sir, we didn’t stop in any town long enough.”

“Ha! All crouched in the heath like hedgehogs, I suppose. Upon my word, that was scandalous! H’m. Whom did you join up with?”

“The Bramwells—Gammer and Joseph. They said they remembered you, and hoped you were well.”

“The Bramwells!”

Here Taid rubbed his chin, looked reflectively out the window at the moor road, and raising himself up on his toes, then down, gave a curious sort of chuckle.

“And what have they been doing?”

“Dukkering—telling fortunes. And soldering pots. They go in their caravan all over Wales, and last year they went to Devon, but Gammer got homesick, so they stayed only a week.”

“Homesick for the old hedges.”

“They had a message for you, but I didn’t understand it. ‘Tell him Wongur kairs the grasni jal.’ It means ‘Money makes the mare go,’ but when I told them we hadn’t a mare at Moor House, they looked at each other and laughed, then said you would understand what it meant.”

Taid gave a quiet laugh. He was not quite sure himself how much his son knew of his past life, how he had for years been one of the Bramwell tribe, though of another branch that were horse-traders and knew more of the land and its crops. And being owner of Moor House with its fine wall and trees, he was thought to be a wealthy man, even by people in the village. And such little tales as these, some of them even stranger, all the villagers knew, though not in the deep way that Gwilym knew them.

A bell tinkled. It roused Gwilym from his reverie. The morning session was over.

“No riot, boys!” said Elias Schoolmaster. “Go out gently!—Master Anwyl, please stay in a moment.”

Truant in the Turf

THE heavy oaken door slammed with a jar that rocked the house. The pupils dashed whooping into the street, Mr. Elias listened patiently until the uproar was gone, then he motioned Gwilym into a seat.

“It seemed to me you were a long way off during the lesson. Thoughts gone a’ wool-gathering again?”

“My answers were right, sir.”

“By the book, yes. You do your work well enough, and even better. That isn’t the point. You were spoken to twice, and you didn’t hear. Up to some mischief, aren’t you?”

“I think not, sir.”

“But you would like to be!” The schoolmaster was stern. “I know what’s got into you. You know what I’ve been warning my pupils. Not to speak to any Gipsy in the village. They are a lot of reprobates, and Heaven knows how many ducks and baskets of wash will be missing before dawn. Ply your book, learn some home-keeping ways, and avoid those rough people entirely.”

He watched the scowl deepen on Gwilym’s forehead, and resumed in a milder tone.

“I am speaking like a schoolmaster. And, by the same token, like a kind of policeman. Am I not?”

Gwilym thought it politer to keep silent. Then it puzzled him, the schoolmaster’s faint smile as he sat with arms folded on the desk, gazing at him owlshly through thick glasses.

“What do you want to be, eh?” he asked, intently balancing a ruler on his finger.

“I should like to move about—go here and there, and see various strange places.”

“That’s the heavy trouble with you. What I asked was what you wanted to be.”

Gwilym shifted uneasily and toyed with his cap. This was uncomfortable. He wanted to be outside, far down the road with his friends.

“I know well enough what the trouble is, Master Anwyl. I taught your father, and my advice, at this time of year, didn’t do him much good, neither. Well, so it is with the trout and the hare—they will go their own way. And what avail is it to chide them?”

Then Gwilym became aware of those searching, gleaming eyes behind the desk.

“Where is your grandfather?”

“He—he left last night, sir.”

“And were you very much surprised?” asked Mr. Elias dryly, filling his pipe. He lighted it and sent up a leisurely puff of smoke.

“A little. We wish we knew when he was coming back.”

“The less you worry about him, the better. For a long time he’s been a hug-the-hearth, working all last summer with the crops, and this winter cutting peat, and never a look beyond the village. And you could see he had something on his mind. When a man feels the house that irksome, he had best be gone for a while.”

Mr. Elias smiled wisely at his pipe. He and Taid were the thickest of friends, and besides their weekly game of draughts, they joined for walks across the moor, or to the lakes for trout fishing, and it was not probable either had a secret apart from the other.

“He left us with Shan Gof, sir.”

“And why not, pray? A good countrywoman; a little close with the pennies, but no worse than anybody else in the village.”

The schoolmaster said no more, but pondered over his pipe, and Gwilym stood up. As he expected, the remark was:

“Very good, you may go.”

Gwilym left the room, two steps more, and he was out in the road, stalking, with his cloak flat on the wind, towards Dame Olwen’s. His friends were there,

in the parlor of her little bake-shop, eating their luncheon. The parrot at the threshold rasped out, with a flap of its wings:

“Olwen! Gwas ar drws—gwas ar drws! A boy at the door!”

The boys within, who were talking and babbling all at once, with great clatter of mugs, turned their heads.

“Gipsies!” shouted Evan Blacksmith to Gwilym. “They went right past here, and you missed them!”

“Which way did they go?”

“Up past the mill. Perhaps they’re going up to the moor.”

“Then I shall see them tonight.”

Gwilym sat down to his luncheon of buttermilk, a roll, and a piece of black honeycomb, which Dame Olwen got from her own bee-hives. The other lads watched him covertly, wondering why he had been detained. The penalty of being kept in for part of luncheon hour was inflicted for only such crimes as stoning cats, breaking windows, or looting the Vicar’s plum trees.

“What did Elias say?”

“He said the best way to harden chestnuts is to boil them.”

“That’s a whopper!”

“Then why did you ask me questions?”

The winter game in the village was “whacks,” which is played by a ring of boys, armed with pierced chestnuts dangling at the end of a cord. Each chestnut got a tremendous whack from all the other chestnuts in turn; or until it flew into powder or got cracked. Gwilym was the champion whacksman. In the autumn he picked the most promising chestnut in three or four bushels, put it to soak in varnish a week, then cured it in the shade. The other lads, not so shrewd in the ways of chestnuts, or not having a wise grandfather to teach them, baked theirs in the oven or in the sun. So his whack lasted the winter out, and even at the end of the season was worth a top and a penny to boot.

“My father says your whack is a ball of painted lead,” said Evan Blacksmith.

“That’s not true!” shouted Gwilym, rising.

“A fight! A fight!” shouted the others.

The hubbub started again. The air was tense with expectation of physical combat. Dame Olwen put her hands to her ears.

“Oh, my infants, you moider me! Drink your good milk and tea like fine little gentlemen. Or the neighbors will tell the good Mr. Elias I can’t keep order, and then where will you get your honey and buns?”

The school bell tinkled down the road. After putting coppers in Dame Olwen’s palm, the boys rushed out. Gwilym followed slowly. He could see Elias Schoolmaster in the entrance of the grimy stone building, and the filing-in of boys with the meek, respectful step of prisoners returning after parole.

The clouds were gone, the sun hung poised in a field of soft blue and warmed the village that looked freshened after the rains. From the hills came a mild breeze scented with heather. What suddenly possessed him, Gwilym did not know, but he turned and walked back, going on towards the bridge. This was an ancient bridge, built of gray blocks, but these could hardly be seen on the outside, because it was hung over with blankets of moss and ivy.

Here were the village loungers, warming their bones in the sunlight and looking into the water where fish swam lazily in the depths. It was always pleasant to look at the fish. They were masters of their element, who came and went as they chose, or just remained poised for hours, with an occasional flick of the tail, or a soft recoil as they bumped their noses against a mossy boulder.

The pool was overhung with alders. Gwilym bent over for a look. An old man next to him, whose beard was spread white and silky over the parapet, made room for him.

“Look you, lad! There you see a salmon, that silver giant down at the bottom, far bigger than any of the trout. And he is the same one that came here last summer when he was a gleisiad, a yearling. What do you suppose he is thinking about? All the cool, green caves he has visited, and the shrimps he has crunched between his teeth.

“Think of the places Master Salmon has visited!”

He murmured delightedly in his beard. “Gliding through worlds of gray-green water, and looking up at bridges, seeing the parts of them that are hidden from us, and heads of people staring down at him and saying, ‘Hello, where do you come from, I wonder, and where else do you go, and how do you know the right time of year to go voyaging to certain places, never a week early nor a week late, as if you had a calendar in your head or a learning bestowed by water schoolmasters?’

“Eh? How do you suppose they come by all this knowledge? Or do they just poke about here and there, blindly, as if they were wound up by clockwork?”

“I really don’t know, sir.”

“Ah, of course not. And you wouldn’t ever dream of asking, neither, gwas bach—my little lad, until you have a beard and it as white as if snow had fallen upon it.”

“I had never thought of asking, sir. But I shall. And I may find out.”

The elder groped in his pocket and pulled out a shagreen case. From this he extracted a pair of spectacles, adjusted it upon his nose, then looked at Gwilym.

“If you do, you must come and tell me. This summer, or perhaps next summer, but do not delay with your knowledge, for time flies like a mountain stream and who asks a question today may not hear the answer tomorrow.”

“And shall I find you here?”

“If there is sunshine, yes. It is a comfort to feel it on one’s back.”

They shook hands, and the old man insisted on accompanying him to the end of the bridge.

“And remember, young sir, that nothing gives a man so much pleasure as the kind of knowledge that his soul needs. You have the mark of the wanderer on your face, though you speak as can only one born to it, the Welsh tongue. In your travels you will see much, and they will be pictures to hang in the gallery of your mind. So, when you come to be my age, you can close your eyes and see them live again, instead of having to peer down from a bridge to see what is reflected in the water.

“Farewell to you, young sir.”

A very strange old gentleman indeed, Gwilym thought, as he went on. Though probably a wise one, else he would have been sitting in the stuffy taproom of the “Cross Keys,” drinking and arguing with commercial travelers instead of lounging on the ivy-covered bridge, indulging his soul and trying to probe the secrets of the water and the things that moved in its cool depths. He turned for another look, and there he was nodding at him.

“Young sir,” he called out, “just this to carry in mind. See that your shoes fit and keep the strings tied.”

“Thank you, sir. I shall.”

“Kushto bak!” shouted the old gentleman.

And that was very strange, too, for this was “Good luck!” in Gipsy words, and Gwilym left pondering how odd it all was, that the old gentleman was smarter than he appeared, and that you can never tell by the mere look of them

what people might have in their heads.

The afternoon of his truancy had started off with the profit of a little wisdom. There was no telling how it would wind up. He decided to return home by the road past the woolen mill, for there was less chance of running into village folk who might ask him why he wasn't at school. Besides, being the longer and more adventurous way, it was the one he preferred.

Along the stream there was much tall hemlock, as thick as his wrist. A length of its hollow stalk, cut directly across the joint, if fitted with a plunger, made an excellent squirt-gun. The stalks of smaller diameter, also pithless, made pipes through which a bit of elastic could snap a rowan berry almost further than a sling-shot. Then, close by, was a tract of bwrli, or Welsh myrtle, a handful of which, placed on a table, would rid a house of flies. He gathered a bunch of it and stowed a length of hemlock in his pocket.

He also hacked off a piece of green willow, full of sap and with a smooth, enamel skin, the best material from which to make a whistle. The path wound through a turfy region thick with brier and furze, greatly disliked by the shepherds, for the flocks, pushing through, left handfuls of their wool on the growth. Many a time he had gleaned the tufts, washed clean by the winter rains, and so white that they glistened like snow, and filling a bag with them had sold it at the mill for a shilling.

The one drawback to this region was that he couldn't get lost in it; here was not real adventure enough, for he knew it too well, every foot and inch, every rabbit-hole even. He climbed to a slight rise among the bracken, from which he could see a mile to every point of the compass, and drawing the visor of his cap to shade his eyes from the light, peered for a trace of the Gipsies. The line of the cart-wheels was visible, but there was no other sign. Moving on, he came to a diggings with a long mound of earth and pebbles cast up from the excavation. Here was a deposit of reddle, the reddish clay that shepherds used to mark their flocks after the shearing. The shaft was fairly deep, four or five times the height of a man, and it was topped by a straddling gallows-frame, with loose rope hanging from it.

He had visited this place often, once or twice with Elias Schoolmaster, who loved to dangle his legs over the edge and study the strata of the pit, with its bands of sesquioxide of iron. Indeed, the master came here almost every Sunday, when the weather was fine, to smoke his pipe over a book, usually a history of the Roman times.

"It's a rust pit, Master Anwyl," he told him. "Only rust, good for nothing except for the farmers to mark their silly sheep with. But it was full of good

iron once. Those ancient Romans were not fools. They came a long way for that iron, and they dug up plenty of it. Iron for swords and spears and daggers. And to show you how much they knew about mining, look at that vestige of a tunnel there at the bottom.”

Gwilym lay face down and peered over the side. It was better than going to school to look into the pit, for instead of getting sleepy over a book you could imagine the Romans down there, digging for all they were worth. A dozen brawny fellows in skirts, with their helmets on, no doubt, to protect their skulls from the tumbling rocks. After filling the bucket, they would step back.

“Ola, up there, Trophius!”

“Bestir yourselves on high, O rams’ heads that doze while we sweat below here! Up she goes! Holy Numa, how thy muscles crack! Hast no more strength to thine arms than newborn lambs?”

Then burly Roman laughter under the gray sky of Wales, and over there in the woods, while the Druids intoned their sacred chants under the mistletoe, the Britons, stained blue with woad, hammered out swords at the forge and sharpened their spears for the fight on the morrow. And all that was over a thousand years ago.

With chin resting on his hands, Gwilym dreamed over the ancient wars and life on the heath. Those jolly days were gone forever, and all who dwelt here were simple folk that durst not wander a stone’s throw away from their chimney corner, and would probably get lost if they did. As he thought, his eyes roamed over the ground, picking out the curled fern tendrils, the white flax buds and the tips of yellow on the gorse.

He gave a start. At the horizon was a figure looking his way, a stocky man with a beard, short velvet breeches, and a rifle slung over his back. It was Harris Gamekeeper, who looked after the birds and rabbits for a Duke who owned about all the land one could see from this point. Once a year the Duke, accompanied by a few friends, came to stay at Harris Gamekeeper’s cottage—a small edifice in the center of the field—and after shooting a little, they went away to remain for another year.

It seemed foolish to keep all that land idle for three days’ shooting. And perhaps it was. Taid said so. And so did Elias Schoolmaster once, when four tenants who had lived on the moor had been forced to leave the cottages where they were born, and emigrate to Australia, so the Duke’s rabbits and pheasants could be shot at easier.

“Some of them were soldiers in the War,” Taid said. “Better be tinkers

sleeping under a hedge rather than poor farmers harried by a lackey or gamekeeper.”

Because of this, the Duke wasn't liked at all in the village, but since he was never there, the dislike resounded on the stolid head of Harris Gamekeeper, and the boys were up to all manner of little tricks that made him unhappy. The trouble was that Harris Gamekeeper's dog was well acquainted with the boys, and never barked when they came round, even in the dead of night.

A week after the eviction of the tenants, two of Elias Schoolmaster's pupils came to Harris Gamekeeper's cottage when all was pitch dark and they could hear the inmate snoring. They stuck the small end of a long beer-funnel into the keyhole of his front door, and held the flare end over a fire they kindled on the brick step. It is surprising what a great smoke burning tow and moss will make, when drenched with oil. Half strangled by the fumes, and yelling with fright, Harris Gamekeeper jumped out of bed, and after stumbling over the chairs, attained the front door and wrenched it open, but not before the lads had a good start down the path.

Then, the next time they came up, a month afterward, they captured Harris Gamekeeper's three cats, sedate and respectable old tabbies. Holding each between their knees, they shod them with large walnut shells, which had been scooped out and filled with pitch. The window was pried open, and the unhappy cats, dropped within, clattered about on unsteady feet, and the noise was tremendous, as if a stableful of horses had been backed into the kitchen. This killed whatever good feeling Harris Gamekeeper ever had for the boys, which wasn't very much in the first place.

He made formal complaint. The next day Elias Schoolmaster, after ringing the bell for attention after class, cleared his throat and looked at them severely.

“Mr. Harris feels that he has just cause for complaint. Certain young individuals have annoyed him at his premises and caused him loss of sleep. They have injured his throat with smoke. They have deplorably mistreated his cats, for which he has a great solicitude.

“Such conduct is unworthy of those who aspire to be Christians. That will be all, young gentlemen. Class dismissed for luncheon.”

Gwilym, lying in the heather, put fingers in his mouth and blew a shrill, blatting whistle. Harris Gamekeeper started, shaded his eyes, and looked for invaders. In the village were several poachers who made forays in the darkness, accompanied by their dogs. And this was the signal for the lurchers to come to heel, that low, blatting whistle Gwilym sounded time and again.

Harris Gamekeeper trod back and forth, with his gun leveled, his wrath mounting higher every moment. To poach in broad daylight, this was impudence. It was like a thief snapping his fingers under the nose of the law. Gwilym backed to the edge of the bank, then wriggled down. He gave one last whistle, mocking and prolonged, blowing with fingers in his mouth. Then, greatly pleased with himself, he trotted along the river bed until he got back to the road and was out of the preserve.

Here Come Gipsies

HE pushed open the gate, and was home again. Shan had not returned. In the summer-house Myfi was curled up on the bench, reading a book.

“Has anybody come along the road?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” she answered without looking up. “Who should?”

“Nobody in particular.” After a while, he remarked, “Don’t you think I’m home early?”

She had not noticed that, either; she read on, absorbed in her page. He walked in the garden, half the time his eyes straying to the hedge. This afternoon the Whistlers should appear.

He felt sure it was their caravan that had passed through the village. If they looked over at him, what should he do? Just look back at them, or shake his head? Or had he not better speak, as the head of the house. At least, that would be polite.

He thought of asking Myfi, but she was far too young to be troubled with such a problem and a mystery; she might even be frightened at the idea of the Whistlers coming when they were alone.

Still pondering, he went into the house for his fishing rod, jointed it in the garden, the other side of the house, and began to fish in the little stream. Taid allowed him to catch three trout a week. No more, for that would be wasteful; and unless plenty of fish were alive in the pool, the gnats would multiply and become a vexation. He got no bite. He tried the Red Moth, the Green Gadfly, oiling the feathers so that the lure floated on the water. The fish were shy. He would sit and wait for something to happen, either in the pool or over the hedge.

He remembered the first time he saw the visitors. He had been at Moor

House just a week, and he was standing near the asparagus patch, watching his grandfather till the plants. A shadow fell on the ground. It was the shadow of a head reared above the trimmed box-plant of the hedge, then another head cast a shade by its side. He turned. Two men were looking into the garden and at Taid who was on his knees, working away with a dibble. No one could mistake those shadows; Taid saw them, but he paused only for an instant, transplanted a root, patted down the earth, and then took up another. Gwilym saw from his attitude that he knew he was being watched.

The visitors remained still, as if they were carved out of wood. They whistled a bar or two, then withdrew their heads. Gwilym slipped to the gate and peered through. A Gipsy van, a wardo painted bright yellow, was trundling away. The next spring they came again; and every spring after that. But he never spoke of the visitors to Taid, who kept silent about them, as if he were unaware of their existence.

They often came to Gwilym in his dreams, always the same wardo, the large bright-yellow van pulled by two huge, shaggy-footed Percheron horses. The "Whistlers," he named them in talking with himself and with Myfi.

A hand touched his shoulder.

"Look," whispered Myfi.

He rose swiftly, and their faces lifted to the hedge near the gate. They heard the creak of wheels and the rattle of harness chains. The foliage parted, and two men looked over. One puckered his mouth and trilled the familiar whistle, a spray of bird-like notes.

The darker of the two men, who wore earrings, looked at Gwilym in feigned surprise.

"Fishing?" he asked. "What luck comes your way?"

"Nothing yet."

He seemed rather jolly, Gwilym thought; sly, but quite jolly.

"What kind of bait are you using?"

"The Red Moth."

"Won't do. No." The Gipsy shook his head. "Not for another week. Try a little fat earthworm."

"Thank you, sir. I will."

"D'you know who we are?"

“Yes, sir. You are the Whistlers.”

“The Whistlers? Ha, ha—that’s funny. Jubal, we are the Whistlers! He knows us. Do we know him? We’ll ask him for a sign.”

The one called Jubal pulled out a silver watch, dangled it at arm’s length and asked, “In Rommany, what’s this?”

“A hora,” said Gwilym.

They both laughed. “Aye, that’s Thomas’ own grandson. Brought up right, too. Knows the proper Rommany.”

“What do you want this spring?” asked Gwilym. “I suppose you came to look at my grandfather.”

“Not to put too fine a point on it,” said Jubal, “we did. Isn’t he here then, my chavo?”

“He’s gone.”

“Gone! Sup mi-Duvel! Where away?”

“Up the moor road. Up towards the sea, and perhaps further on.”

Natty stroked his nose.

“To what fair?”

“Since he didn’t say, he must have had good reasons for not saying.”

“The chavo’s a smart one—up to trap,” laughed Jubal.

“You know him very well, don’t you?” Gwilym asked.

The darker Gipsy laughed. “If anyone should know Thomas Anwyl, it must be Natty of the Ringos. Aye, he’s known him for years and years.”

“Then won’t you come in and have a cup of tea?” said Myfi.

“Thank you kindly. But will you come and have a pot of tea with us? Gammer is building a fire under the kettle—over yonder in the heather.”

“I shall be very glad to come.”

“We’ll be waiting,” said Natty, and the wardo rolled away.

“Now what are you going to do?” asked Myfi.

“I’m going, of course. And you stay right here, go back to the summer-house with your book.”

He went in to brush his hair and put on a clean collar; a person couldn’t do

much less on being invited out to tea. They seemed very pleasant men, the visitors. And if the one called Natty had known Taid for years and years, as he said, then it was very probable he was a respectable, law-abiding man.

He struck out down the moor road, waded through the gorse and towards an old turf pit which was filled with hazel-bush and ferns. There was a golden-yellow wardo, and near it two great horses, shining like seals, their tails pleated with colored straw and ribbons. At the sight of the camp his heart beat faster. It spelled adventure, it meant the exciting and the forbidden and the mysterious. Mr. Elias had adjured all other scholars not to go anywhere near a Gipsy camp under pain of birching. But this was not at all going to a camp. The camp, in a quite wonderful manner, had rolled up to one's doorstep.

Under a yew tree stood the wardo, and Natty was leaning against a wheel: a large, bronzed figure in corduroys, with a white felt hat pushed back on his head. Hands in pockets, he was whistling like a bird pouring out its soul in gladness at sunshine after rain. About his neck was a scarf of yellow silk, the ends pulled through a silver ring. He had donned fresh corduroys, and his face appeared newly scrubbed.

"Welcome to our hearth, sir," he said, sweeping his hat low before him. He took from his pocket a new tobacco pipe.

"If you smoke, sir, will you do us the favor to accept this? And if you don't, well, keep it for a gift. Did you ever see one like it? It wasn't I made it, but our Jubal. A very great hand with the knife, Jubal is. Carved it from the heart of an old brier root he dug up in a churchyard. You'll find it'll draw well, and be easy puffing."

It was very agreeable to Gwilym to be treated like a grown-up. The pipe was large and shining. He thought how beautiful it would look on the rack in the chimney-corner, where all the pipes were sooty clays, a row of them, sacred to their owners, Elias Schoolmaster and more of Taid's village cronies, who came up now and then to spend an evening at his fireside.

"I think, Mr. Ringo, it is a very handsome pipe."

"Jubal has no reason to be ashamed of it."

With a bow, Natty waved Gwilym up the steps of the van. It astonished Gwilym to see how large it was inside. It had curtains at the windows, folding beds, a pair of cages with alert-looking jackdaws in them, and hanging from the roof no end of copper pots, jugs, milk pitchers, and long ewers, so polished that they seemed of gold.

On the wall was a map of England and Wales, stuck with pin-flags.

“This wardo has rolled into many places,” said Gwilym.

“Aye, it has traveled mightily,” said Natty. “But never outside of Wales. You won’t find a single pin-prick on the Anglaterra part. This wardo has seen five thousand sunsets—counting the days when we didn’t see them because of rain or clouds. And we Ringos never can bear to see a sunrise twice under the same hedge.”

“You like to be always moving?”

“Aye. And we get a little encouraged too, at times. Whenever the Squire or the constable comes along. That right—Sixpence?”

He addressed a dog with drooping ears and not much of a tail, that fawned at his knees.

“This is Sixpence,” said Natty. “He isn’t worth more nor tuppence, but it cheers him up to be called by a higher price. Makes him think he is valuable.”

Behind the wardo was a thick mass of fern, and in the middle of it was a fire sending up a string of blue smoke. The other Gipsy who had appeared over the hedge was there, working over an anvil. A pot hung from a tripod over some crackling knots. An old woman was stirring in it with a spoon.

“What’s your name, Young Master?” asked Natty.

“Gwilym.”

“Aye, to be sure, Gwilym. Well, here are we three Ringos. That is Jubal, the worker in brass and copper. And this is Gammer Ringo. And we are all—friends—aye, let’s say just friends—of your grandfather.”

Gammer Ringo, wielding her spoon without ceasing, sniffed at the vapors and did not turn. Natty yelled into her ear.

“Gammer, this be the little chavo of Moor House. Gwilym Anwyl, it is.”

The old woman blinked at Gwilym, her cherry-red eyes rheumy in the brier-smoke. “Aye,” she squeaked, “that is Thomas’ chavo, Geoffrey.”

“No, Gammer. Geoffrey grewed up long, long ago, and he has been mullered a long time since.”

“Mullered,” Gwilym knew, meant dead. Gammer keened for a moment in a low, prolonged wail, and her voice was like a rusty door-hinge.

“Was it the policemen that nashed up poor Geoffrey with a rope?” she cried. “Ay di me, what did he do?”

“It wasn’t the policemen,” said Gwilym. “He was a captain in the War, with

medals, and he was killed.”

She grabbed Gwilym with a bony claw, and fingered his coat, which was of good cloth, made for his birthday by Puw Tailor, who had got a bolt of fine material especially from the woolen mill. Gwilym feared she would pull off the brass buttons.

“That will be a fine coat he has,” she croaked. “Wongur makes the mare go, Jubal. No wongur in your bank, and you wears gunny-rags. Boro wearus makes the boro rye!”

He understood, for Taid often spoke playfully in Gipsy to him, and that, too, was Taid’s favorite proverb, “Fine clothes make the fine gentleman.”

Jubal whispered in his ear. “Her mind is gone back to the old days when living was rougher for us folk. She liked them better. There’s some of us would like to ride about in a motor-wardo, but not Gammer, so we roll behind horses. It’s more fitting, sir. The Ringos are all horse-trader men, anyway.”

“Gammer, now for the tea.”

She fetched some cups and plates, and spread them on a tarpaulin. Solid gold, Gwilym thought, and it struck him the Ringos were as rich as Midas. Then he saw the ware was of beaten copper pennies, paper-thin and burnished.

She brewed the tea and filled the cups, which the two men blew at and sipped with great ceremony. Then, absently, as she stood and looked about her, she asked: “Where is the raklo’s wardo?”

“I have no wardo, Gammer,” said Gwilym.

“Did you pad the hoof over the moor?”

“No, I live here. In yonder house.”

“A Gorgio?” she muttered, blinking her cherry-red eyes at him. “One of the house folk? S’up me! As true as my father, you look Rommany!”

“All the dark folk are not on the road, Gammer,” said Natty, filling his cup from the kettle. “And why shouldn’t the chavo be dark? He’s Thomas Anwyl’s grandson.”

They sat round the fire, Natty scratching the head of Sixpence, and Gammer fanning the embers with an old hat. The pot held soup and it cast out an aroma of herbs.

“Shall I bring you some oatcake?” asked Gwilym. “We have plenty in the house,” he added, forgetful of Shan’s thriftiness.

“Oatcake!” cried Natty. “That’s first-rateus! Gammer can make a dinner out of air, but she can’t make oatcake. That’s gentry fare.” He reached under the wardo and pulled out a pair of rabbits. “It’s Sixpence what has got us our dinner today.”

“Isn’t it out of season to catch rabbits?” asked Gwilym. “There’s the signs around here with the law on it.”

“Sixpence doesn’t wear spectacles when he goes hunting,” said Natty gravely. “It won’t do for a dog to know too much, leastways a Rommany dog.”

The men began to skin the rabbits, and Gwilym, wandering back to the house, saw that the brook was near by. The pool under the alders was still, the water tinged an amber hue by the dark brier roots, for it had risen to the edge of the bank. Lying face down on the bracken, he crawled forward slowly, and peered over. Under the water was a realm in itself, a wilderness of pebbles and lichen, magnified to hills and a forest. He lowered his face until his forehead touched the water. Then he kept utterly still and watched, as if through a lens.

White, crimson, emerald-green and yellow—the pebbles at the bottom were of all hues. And from them rose a forest of green columns, miniature tree-trunks, with branches and leaves. These were rice plants. Taid had planted them. Years before, when he came to this region after a life of wandering, and, pleased by its stillness and bleak charm, bought the farm, he gave this brook his especial care. Trout inhabited it, and he had a mysterious, Gipsy-like delight in watching fish, and this was still his favored lounging place.

He guarded the brook as a preserve, and every year he and Gwilym sowed rice in it to provide herbage and a lurking-place for the dwellers. The two ejected the shot from cartridges, filled them with wild rice, rewadded the shells, and fired into the floor of the brook. That drove the grains deep into the rich mud, and the plants flourished sturdily.

Gwilym had often wondered how it would feel to be a fish, and several times he had got into the water, higher up where the brook was wide and deeper than his height, and threaded his way through palings of rice-stalks; eyes open, watching the trout that gazed at him in astonishment, pretty much as he would have gazed at an elephant that should suddenly gallop into the close of Moor House.

The trout were thicker here in this narrow part of the brook. Three or four shapes were hovering in the depths. They resolved themselves into large trout; motionless, their sides or the tips of the noses touching now and then against the boulder, with a lazy recoil. They had overfed and were dreaming.

He put in his brown arm, inch by inch, until it was submerged almost to the shoulder. It was safe now to move his fingers, and they moved as did the water-plants, the lichen, and the bannerets of moss, given life by the subtle currents at the bottom. Stillness would have alarmed the fish; with moving things they were familiar. He brushed his fingers gently against the side of the largest fish, the patriarch of the trout in the pool; brushed them back and forth, slowly widening his hand. It moved towards the head, behind the gills he grasped swiftly, pulled up the trout, and threw it over his shoulder.

The weight surprised him, the patriarch flopped, leaped and drummed violently on the heather-matted earth.

Because he had moved as little as possible and made no splash, there was no alarm below. The other fish had hardly stirred, and it was as if the patriarch had merely sprung up at a fly and then darted elsewhere. He lowered his hand again, and played again.

In this fashion he caught three more, and they were nearly as large as the first. Cunning trout they were, deep in the ways of the angler, and too wise to rise to any baited hook. Gwilym cut off a myrtle branch, strung them through the gills, threw the catch upon his shoulder and approached the wardo.

“Bless us!” said Natty, getting up from his knees. “And I was catching a grasshopper for bait. Look, Gammer!”

“Avo!” shrilled the old dame. “Avo, the little Gorgio can lel matchyas faster than any Rommany poacher.”

“Aye, did ye ever see matchyas as fine as that? They’ll run to three pounds apiece.”

They came around him, all talking at once; Jubal, the sooty one, wiping his hands on the burlap apron, grinning, his teeth flashing white through his jet beard.

“It was Thomas learned him all those hukkabens.”

“He did,” laughed Natty. “I’d kiss the book on that.” Then after Gammer had dragged the fish away, he asked, “How good a Rommany are you? Can you rakker the words?”

“Some words, sir. I can chin the cost—meaning I can whittle, and cut osiers for baskets and skewers. And catch fish with my hands. Then there are some other tricks. You can lead calves away by breathing on your palm, then rubbing their noses. You throw dogs off the scent by sprinkling red pepper on your boots.”

“Hear him!” cried the delighted Jubal. “And when you’re lost on the moors or lost on the road, what’s the cry?”

“I should cry out, ‘Hup-hup—Rommany jo-ter!’ Then help will come. A Gipsy will set me on the path again, for it means ‘Gipsies together.’ ”

“And a good cry it is,” said Natty. “As good as a religion, you might say. Many’s the time I’ve both cried it and answered it. Those of a blood should stick together, and not stray apart.”

On the tarpaulin Gammer spread plates and ashwood forks, and at this sign of the approaching meal, Gwilym strolled back to the house for the oatcake. He had made up his mind to go forth with the Ringos. From what he could learn, Taid was gone on a long journey, to be gone for many days, perhaps weeks, or even a month. To hunt for him would be an adventure. Nor would it be fraught with punishment, for he feared neither Taid nor Shan, and as for Mr. Elias, nothing that the schoolmaster had said to him that day was in the nature of a warning. To travel was in the blood of some men at this time of year, and those with loose feet had best be off and have it over with.

“I’m going on with the van,” he said to Myfi in the kitchen, as he took the oatcake from the shelf. “They’ll give me a lift up the road.”

“Oh, you’ll catch it if Shan finds out! She’ll be just hopping!”

“Let her hop. What shall I bring you from the fairs?”

“You can bring me a thimble and a hand-mirror.”

“I’ll promise. Are you coming out to see the Ringos? They’re really quite nice.”

“I’m reading a book,” she said, going out again to the summer-house. “Good-bye.”

“Gammer will rakker some Scripture words,” said Natty, when Gwilym came back with the oatcake. She mumbled a grace, then they all sat down to the tarpaulin spread with grilled trout, rabbit, and plums. It was wholesome and tasty fare, sauced with hunger and the tang of the moor wind.

“I’m sorry there isn’t any butter to spread on it,” said Gwilym, as Natty took up an oatcake. “The maid carried it off to sell in the village.”

“They that have no other meat,” said Natty, “plain bara cerch are glad to eat.”

“Hear him!” shouted Jubal, with his mouth full. “There’s poetry on his tongue as if he were a Welshman instead of a Rommany.”

“Us Ringos have stayed in this land long enough to be both,” said Natty. “We have three tongues, and the more tongues you have, in faith!—the more poetry you can speak.”

“I’ll give you some Rommany verses,” said Jubal, and he chanted:

There were more verses, and they were sad, though Jubal sang them with sturdy cheerfulness, and they uttered the plaint of a Rommany at the Gorgios, or settled folk, who were trying to take his life away. Natty chanted a verse, then Gwilym gave one in Welsh, about the lysowen and the eos, or the lizard and the nightingale.

Gammer refused to eat whilst the others were engaged in this poetic round, and applied herself to a bottle which she held bottom upwards at the sky, for there was hardly a spoonful of brandy left in it.

They dined handsomely, then wiped their hands on the woolly back of Sixpence who came to each in turn for a gift of rabbit bones. Gammer withdrew to string a handful of dewberries into a necklace. Jubal fetched his concertina and played a tune. Gwilym lay flat on his back, for here the heather was dry; he listened to the music, the humming of a stray bee, and stared up at the indigo sky; thinking how new and strange it was to see the world turned upside down, the sky for earth and the earth for sky. He thought what a grand, free life this was, and how, instead of feeling among strangers, he felt he was among people he had known all his days. His gaze wandered, and against the blue sky loomed Natty’s white felt hat. Between the teeth was a clay pipe, and through them came words in a slow, quiet tone.

“Your grandfather—he said he was going to a fair?”

“He didn’t say. He told nobody at all. He didn’t even go to chapel yesterday, where he is the deacon and passes the collection plate. Most of the time he had been standing on the moor. We had some very fine days, with hot sunshine, and there was perfume from the heather. The rain had made the air fresh. He just stood out there, silent, with arms folded, looking far over towards the end of the moor, and said nothing to anybody.”

“Belike, he was thinking of life on the long road—and friends he used to know.”

“Perhaps.”

“What think you, my raklo?”

Gwilym thought he knew. But he felt it unwise to say Taid expected the Whistlers to be along any hour, and wished to be gone before they came.

“He said nothing, only he sometimes whistled to himself.”

Natty blew out smoke, then pursed his lips and whistled a bar. He repeated it, then hummed words to the air.

“ ‘Hatch till the dood wells a-pree.’ Was that it?”

“It was,” cried Gwilym, sitting up. “That was it! And the words mean, ‘Wait until the moon comes up.’ ”

Natty threw back his head and trolled out the song vibrantly, as Jubal accompanied him on the concertina.

“That’s the song of the Rommany chals, Young Master, when they say good-bye to the hedge where they have camped, and go out on the road again.”

Natty knocked out his pipe against the iron pot. “It’s time to be going.”

“Why so early?”

“The spirit moves us, my raklo.”

Gwilym reflected. It would be evening when Shan returned, or perhaps nightfall. Quiet when the Master was in the house, she was a scold when he was away, and the prospect of hearing her complaints was not cheering. Why not seize the chance that was now offered to him to wander out, see much of the great world, the fair, and come back with Taid? He had, moreover, said good-bye to Myfi, and after that he would feel foolish if he returned just then to the house.

“If you have room, Mr. Ringo, I should like to come along with you. I want to look for my grandfather.”

“A world of room,” said Natty. “As many as ten can sleep under our wardo, if they leave their heads out.”

“Avo!” creaked Gammer. “What if they dick the chavo riding by? And shout for the constable who will put us in the cold stiraben with lock on the door and bars at the window.”

“He’s dark-faced, Gammer,” laughed Jubal. “He’ll pass.”

“Aye, that’s so,” she mumbled. “The Gorgio’s darker nor any of us.”

She puttered about, gathering up the tarpaulin and stuffing the plates in a sack. Gwilym pulled up the tripod stakes and slung them with the pot under the wardo steps, and tried to look as calm as he could, though he shook with excitement. The sun glowed like a paper lantern through the mist. A pair of rabbits, with a flash of white tails, bounded through the heather, and Sixpence

after them, barking. A lark whirled by, its wings cutting a curve like a boomerang. Under the gorse roots a cricket strummed a banjo rhythm.

“D’ye hear that?” asked Natty, coming up with the horses and a clank of chains. “A sign of good weather.”

Gammer peered at the heath, stooping low, then glanced at the wheels of the van. There were snails upon them, big-shelled snails with their viscid track all over the iron.

“Natty, there’s bawris on the wheels! Ye’ll pick them off.”

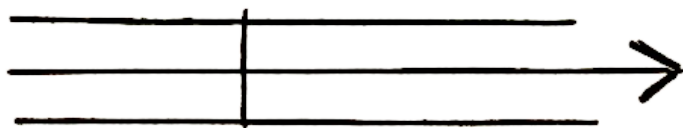
He did so, and Gwilym helped him.

“The snails, too, are Rommanies,” said Natty. “They carry their tents on their backs, and are very great wanderers. They squeak sometimes, and if you’re lucky you’ll hear them. They talk in our language.”

“Really! I didn’t know that.”

“And likewise,” Natty went on, pointing to the birds on the yew trees, “so do the rooks and the crows and the starlings. They have dark blood, all of them, and dark blood is Gipsy.”

The Ringos got into the wardo, and Gwilym mounted with Natty upon the driver’s box. The next moment it began to roll, and it followed the thin path from the peat bog to the moor road. Where the road began, there was a drop of a foot from the heath. There was not much of a jar, but Natty jammed on the brakes, leaped down, and gave a shout. He pointed at the road, and all four stared at the spot. There was an odd mark on it, three paces long, done with a handful of powdered chalk.



“I say, look here!” said Natty under his breath. “The trin bongo drom, as I live! It’s a patteran, to show which way he went.”

“It must be Taid,” Gwilym said. “We have a box of chalk in the house, and I saw this morning that it was half empty.”

So Taid had left a message after all, one intelligible to the three Ringos if to nobody else.

The Merry Travelers

ON they went again, the horses, with a creaking of harness, clomped up the heavy slope and the course was northerly for miles, then it veered into heather once more, with the wheels bumping over rocks and rabbit-warrens, and a swishing and rending of branches. Sixpence loped ahead through a tangled world of brush, briars and dewberries and fragrant myrtle.

A river, axle-deep, was forded, and the wardo climbed a bank to a flat where stood giant bearded oaks, hung with mistletoe and lichen in torn streamers. Underneath them stood a ring of up-ended stones, higher than Gwilym's head, and in the center, flat-wise, was the largest of all, resting on two supports of mossy granite.

"We've come by the round-about, Young Master," said Natty. "This is a pleasant grove for you to see."

They got out to rest in the shade cast by the branches that formed a sort of vault overhead as in a church, and very strange was the sight of the Gipsies in their brightly colored garb sitting quietly on the slab, as if they were at worship. So dark it was that no birds were in the foliage, and there was not even the chirp of a cricket.

"What a place for a camp!" said Gwilym. "We could stay here a long time and not be disturbed."

"Well, Young Master," said Natty, "there's no law against it, but we couldn't. You see, we can't keep in one place long. Something inside tells us to keep moving, and keep on moving. But we always like to come back to places that our fathers knew. And the places that we like best are those that never change."

He filled his pipe and sat absorbed in the quietude. Gammer fetched her knitting needles and began weaving on a net; Jubal roved about, gathering

acorns for the horses.

“This is a right big stone,” said Natty, “and there were strong men in those days to lift it into place. Avo, how their muscles must have cracked with the weight. It was the Druids, their wise men, like bishops, that chivvied them into it.

“There was a schoolmaster once that told me, when I was a little raklo, that it was an altar for sacrifices. Living sacrifices, they were—perhaps men or women, or young folk—oxen anyway, or perhaps a sheep. But the grove must have rung with cries. A sacred place, like. And we Gipsies come here on the Great Day to build an ashwood fire. Thus the wandering Rommany does honor on the Lord’s birthday.”

“Hear him,” said Jubal. “He is talking fine school words, Gammer,” he shouted to her, then translated Natty’s remarks into Rommany. The old woman shook her head.

“No, there was no killings,” she muttered. “I never saw any, and I have lived many a year.”

“Avo, Gammer,” said Natty, “all that was yeckorus—once upon a time, and a long, long while ago.”

“He knows,” said Jubal with respect. “He went to school with book and slate and sat on a bench with the children of fine people from houses. He is a scholar like the Young Master.”

So all three, even Gammer, sat listening to Natty as if he were preaching gospel.

“And once, my hearers,” he began, “there was English soldiery in the land, making war on poor Welsh folk that were as poor, all but, as Gipsies of this day. They ran off the fat beeves, and the sheep and the geese and hedgehogs so that there was nothing to eat at all on one side. Aye, the poor folk had to eat acorns and boil down cheese-rinds for soup. The river was watched carefully, so there was no catching of fish. The rabbits and hares were so frightened by the tramping of war horses that they never so much as stuck out their heads, even in the night, but dug down deeper and deeper.”

“Avo,” wailed Gammer, “why didn’t they send down a ferret to chivvy them out? Was that a hukkaben they didn’t know?”

“Gammer, they didn’t, for that is a Rommany hukkaben and there wasn’t any Rommanies come over from India in those days. And if there was, they couldn’t have worked a ferret because these rabbits and hares were so

frightened that they dug lower and lower until their paws were worn to the stump and they had got down almost to Australy.”

“Avo, it’s a wonder they didn’t muller of hunger! Those poor house folk!”

“Well, they did, many of them. But there was one that waxed fat, could jump around like a cricket, so strong he was, and a merry one with a laugh that was like thunder, so you could hear it a mile. Twm-Shon-Catti was his name. He was the cleverest bowman in the county, and a very large thorn in the side of the English.

“Now, it was here that the fine generals foregathered, with their servants and cooks. Well, they had a grand victory, so here they cooked a feast, and made a very great pasty with a whole deer in it. They were in right good humor, they had killed twenty mountain men—who are the terriblest fighters—and who should be among the slain but Twm-Shon-Catti. Didn’t they find his tall yew bow and the iron-tipped arrows, a quiverful of them, a yard long?

“So, here they were, the roistering generals, all happy, because the War was as good as over for Twm-Shon-Catti was killed, and the cook made the huge pasty so large that four soldiers near broke their arms lifting it to this slab that was the table.

“The oldest general, the one with a long white beard, took up a knife, after the grace, and with a heart full of thankfulness lifted his fist to plunge the blade into the crust.

“Now, who should be peering around that tree there but Twm-Shon-Catti, who had tightened his belt because he hadn’t eaten that day. He was hungry. To get that pasty he was ready to fight all Anglaterra and every man in it. How good it smelled! It was full of tender deer meat, a sheep’s heart or two, some strips of hedgehog and a bucketful of herbs and onjons, and it just oozed out gravy. The white-bearded general with his cloak and gold chain on, in honor of the pasty, lifted his knife.

“Before it came down—Whang! It broke in mid-air, as if it was struck by lightning. And in the oak back of the general quivered a yard-long arrow. Then a hail of arrows sailed through the air and landed into the pasty, twenty of them, all a-shiver like quills on a porcupine.

“ ‘Twm-Shon-Catti’s back!’ shouted the general.

“ ‘Aye, and there’s a whole army with him!’ yelled the vice-general, and with that they fell away trembling and made for their horses.

“There were some soldiers that tried to stand their ground, but the arrows

came fast and thick, for Twm-Shon-Catti had a pile of them higher than his head, and he couldn't be seen, for he was that smart that he shot around a tree and hit the mark. So they fled away, shouting with their mouths crooked, and Twm-Shon-Catti walked in and sat down to a fine dinner, and there was a good hukkaben for you, Gammer."

"Avo, he was up to trap, he was! It's a Rommany he must have been, Natty, and not a Welshman at all."

"Aye, he was up to trap, Mr. Catti was," said Jubal. "That was fair words for him. There's nothing you can say of a man can go higher than that."

He had built a fire and set up the tripod as a symbol of home. The darkness of the outer world had seeped into the oak grove. The four, with blankets thrown over their shoulders, for night had come with a moist chill, sat about the flames with hands thrust out, watching the snap and crackle of the acorns that burned like coals and resolved themselves into glowing ember, then white ash. Gammer put on the kettle and boiled water. Jubal loosened Sixpence. The dog rushed away into the night, his muzzle to the ground.

"A kanengro it is, gone to earth," said Gammer, taking a swig at a fresh black bottle.

"A rabbit," Natty explained.

He rose, picked up the net Gammer had been working upon, got a box from the wardo, and with Gwilym set out for the edge of the wood. Sixpence was digging and barking alternately at a hole in the ground. Natty gave him a cuff.

"Here, you, go round to the other door and wait."

The dog trotted away and sat upright at the further entrance to the warren. Natty spread a net over the first hole and pegged it down.

"That's to catch rabbits with," he explained. "Sixpence is a good man at the chase, but he's no terrier and can't go to earth."

Going to where the dog kept watch, he opened the box, took out a small tortoise, and with a drop of sealing-wax affixed an end of candle to its back, then started it down the tunnel.

"Now, he's gone poking along. And when the little kanengro, snoozing cushy in his bed like a gentleman, sees a light waddling at him, and he'll think it a Bitti Mullo—that's Rommany for Little Ghost, and he'll bound out in a fright, and in the net we'll catch him—neat as any trout."

Natty replaced the pipe in his beard, smoked a few puffs, then whispered

low.

“It’s Gammer will tell you of the real Bitti Mullos, which some of them are called Momeli Mullos, or Light Ghosts—and it’s ill luck to the man that sees them.

“Time and again you must have seen the Mullos, Young Master,—the Jack-o’-lanterns—that flit and dance by night over water in the fields?

“Now, what they are is little men that beckon you into swampy places and hold the light here and there until you are gone and lost, then they turn about and laugh at you. Mischief is in them. We had a cousin that was going to his tent when he saw the lights of a pair of Mullos, and he thought it was the fire at his camp. They drew him on over a field, through a hedge, then into a swamp where he got stuck up to his knees. He heard laughing, and there, with his two eyes, he saw a pair of goblins holding their sides as they made mock of him. Oh, he was very angry and said if he got hold of them he’d bash in their heads. But they were too foxy and gave him the slip.

“Hullo, there’s Sixpence all tremble with something to happen. Let’s go over.”

They walked back to the net.

“It’s a lot of trouble,” said Gwilym, “and isn’t a ferret handier than a tortoise?”

“Ten million times,” said Natty. “But if a tortoise is slow, he is also sure. And if the prastramengro—the policeman—catches you with a ferret, you’re up before the Squire and fined a pound. But if you have a tortoise, it’s a pet; and the bit of candle is just to go to bed by, so what can he do?”

A rabbit squealed, struggling in the net, and Natty brought down his hand and gave its neck a fatal twist. A few minutes after, the tortoise crawled out, like a sleepy old watchman bearing a light, and after getting loud words of praise from its master, was clapped into the box.

At the fire, Jubal wrapped the meat in wet clay, tossed it upon the embers, and when the envelope whitened and cracked, it was raked out, and removed with the fur.

“All very quiet, as you see, Young Master,” said Natty, as they dined squatting about the fire, eating fennel-root with the game and drinking mugs of hot tea. “And to whom should that little kanengro belong, anyway? To the Duke or Earl or the poor, hungry Ringos? Not that we are so poor, either, but we are hungry.”

“It wants naught but a little mustard,” said Jubal.

Gammer laughed until she coughed and the tears came to her eyes, and Natty himself laughed deeply in his beard.

“It was one of the Barwells, the chair-caners, that had trouble with the mustard,” he explained. “He came to a fine, large farmhouse at night and asked to buy a loaf of bread. The farmer sold him one for sixpence—a big sum, mind you—and gave him a little apple tart to eat. Now in the tart the farmer had put, when Barwell wasn’t looking, a lot of mustard. And when he bit into it, he wept.

“ ‘Now, what is the matter?’ asked the farmer.

“ ‘I weep because I like it so and don’t know where to get more,’ said Barwell.

“ ‘In that case,’ said the farmer, ‘here’s a whole pot of it you can have.’

“ ‘Thank you kindly, sir,’ Barwell told him. ‘And I hope you won’t be weeping yourself in the morning.’

“So when he went out, he picked up an apple in the orchard, put some mustard in it, and went into the pen and gave it to a fine-looking little young pig who gobbled it up.

“There’s few know that if you give a pig an apple filled with mustard you stop his breath. And he won’t squeal when you carry him away. All that the master found in the pen next morning was an empty mustard pot, and that’s what he deserved for playing such a trick on a poor wandering man.”

This stirred them all to mirth again. “It takes a wise man to turn ill luck into good,” said Jubal, who thrust his hands into his pockets, leaped into the air, cracked his heels thrice before he came down, then danced smartly and with grace. His hands wove about him like flames, he leaped and spun, then sped, still dancing, into a distant arch of trees and was swallowed up in the darkness.

Gwilym could still hear his light step drumming on the leaves and turf. It was as if Jubal had been changed back, after the touch of a wand, into the shape of a deer or a faun.

“Brother to the wind, and cousin to the marshlight,” said Natty.

“I wish I could dance like that.”

“A man must be born with the light heels, Young Master. There’s few can touch Natty, but you’ll see some airy ones at the Sirnihatch.”

“Is that the fair?”

“It’s the big gathering of all the Rommanies in Wales. Count the sunrise five times, and you’ll come to the Sirnihatch. And who d’you think you’ll be seeing there?”

“My grandfather?”

“That we shall find out. But you turn into your blanket, for we start with the dawn.”

Gwilym crawled under the wardo, rested his head on a pillow of moss, and pondered on the secret that only the Ringos and Taid knew, and was asleep long before Jubal came back, still dancing.

The day broke with sunshine. The wardo pulled out with everybody in good spirits, it rolled through villages, went through many a common with geese in it, and down a royal highway lined with flowering hedges. A sunshiny, golden world it was, with bright gardens, and the houses of simple folk who nodded to them from the doorways where they stood, watching the caravan go by.

They woke the echoes down the street, for the Percherons were shod heavily with iron; the harness jangled, and Jubal made loud music on his concertina, his “squiffer,” he called it, as he played a country air, “Hoby-Derry-Dando.” It pleased Gwilym to be part of so grand a spectacle. He sat on the high seat beside Natty, who had donned a moleskin waistcoat and wore a violent green scarf pulled through a silver ring. He felt superior to the house folk and to the children, with books under their arms, hurrying to be at the school door before the bell ceased tolling.

At a watering trough they pulled up, and Natty got down to loosen the reins. Spying them, a cottage woman came out with a kettle.

“Master Gipsy,” she said, “please to clout this kettle.”

Natty took it, held it at arm’s length, then spoke doubtfully.

“Ma’am, we shall have to ask the Gaffer. If he says yes, then it can be done.”

Gwilym caught his sly upward glance, then thought a moment, and began:

“Kind lady, we are not tinker folk but dealers in horses. We have no fire handy. But our blacksmith has a soldering iron and heater, and if your neighbors each bring in a pot to mend, he will mend them all at a penny-halfpenny a patch.”

“Blessed King!” shouted the woman. “Well-spoken is the young man on the box, speaking Welsh, indeed, like a doctor or a parson. He speaks it smoother

than any Gipsy ever born. Oh, neighbors! Hey! Keturah, Gwen! Bring here your broken kettles!”

So loudly she called that women appeared at doorways, then hurried up, bearing kettles, pots, pans, and washtubs. Jubal got out with his heater, patched them all in an hour's time, then collected a handful of silver and copper, and the wardo drove off amid loud praise, with Natty laughing to himself.

“Gammer, the chavo should stay with us. He'll make us rich.”

“Aye,” she muttered, sorting the money and pushing it into a stocking. “He'll talk to the town folk for us. By the time we come to the Sirnihatch, he will be like one of the blood.”

“A road change,” Natty remarked, at which all the Ringos laughed, though Gwilym could see no jest in it.

Gammer laughed most. The gain of money had heightened her spirits; she chuckled as she looked out the window just back of Gwilym's seat.

“The ‘road change’—aye! Many a time I've rakkered the story to Natty and Jubal when they were bitti chavos.”

“Yeckorus, once upon a time, Young Master,” said Natty, “there was a poor woman walking into a far country. Anglaterra, it was, and she lost in it. On her head she carried a gunny-sack, and inside a little fat pig. She walked and walked, until her feet were like to break, and she fell asleep under a hedge.

“Now, who should see her but a wicked stepmother, with a baby that she wanted to lose. So she stole away the pig and put in the baby.

“The poor woman opened her eyes and walked on again, a mile down the road, then she heard a cry instead of a squeal. She looked into the sack, and a big fear came over her.

“‘If the pigs in this land change into children,’ she said, ‘what do children change into?’ ”

“What gave her the big fear,” said Jubal, “was she thought it a black Rommany magic.”

“I'll wager,” chuckled Natty. “Us Rommanies, they cross their fingers when they see us come, these countryside folk. Though some of them be our friends.”

By noon the wardo had left the towns behind, and went through a valley, then into a moor that was rough and brier-covered. It trundled to the bottom of a glen, a stark and cool world of glacial boulders, with a long, narrow lake, as

black as ink, and with eagles flying overhead.

“A homelike place for a camp,” explained Natty. “Many’s the time we’ve come here.”

The bleat of sheep came to their ears, and the cry of lambs. That explained the eagles circling about. Near the water was a low enclosure of stones, with a gate, and within it were men shearing sheep. Some farmers in jerseys and shorts, and shepherds leaning on crooks, were watching the lambs.

“Are they strangers to you?” asked Natty, with caution.

Gwilym’s eyes roamed over the scattered company in the glen, the old shepherds, the women in shawls who were knitting at the fire or else preparing food on a long trestle table.

“I have seen many of them at the knitting mill in our village,” he said. “Over there, talking to the shepherd who is playing a penny flute, is Evans Woolbuyer. And the dame slicing bread is his wife.”

“Friends enough,” said Natty.

He drove nearer the group, lifted his hat and spoke.

“Good, respected people, a fine day to you all and plenty of thick wool.”

“Good-day to you, Gipsies,” replied a farmer lounging against the gate, with a pipe between his teeth. “But you’ll find no horses here for trade.”

A shambling fellow in belted coat came nearer. Gwilym recognized him at once as Red Pugh, a gamekeeper who often dallied at “Cross Keys” and was a friend of Harris of the same calling. It puzzled him why Red Pugh should be so far away from the preserve he guarded, which was at the other end of the county. However, these gamekeepers often made journeys to where people congregated near game preserves in the wilds. They were very like policemen.

“What brings you here?” demanded Red Pugh.

“Affairs of the road,” said Natty.

“Have you seen any tortoises?”

“What should I do with a tortoise?”

“Eh?”

Red Pugh looked at the faces about him, and worked up a grim laugh.

“You could use them for a candlestick.”

He cast a glance at Sixpence who was eyeing him with disfavor.

“Now, that’s a fat-looking dog. Feed him well, don’t you?”

“Aye, we take care of our animals—both dog and horses,” Natty replied.

“I know that. What I don’t know is, whose rabbits feed him.”

The Gipsy made no reply. Red Pugh glared at him meaningly, then twirled his stick.

“You’ve been on this moor long enough,” he said. “Back to the road with you and that poacher’s mongrel. Like his master, his ribs bulge out with stolen rabbits.”

At the slow tones, Sixpence uttered a growl. Then a yelp as Red Pugh fetched him a cracking blow on the back with his stick.

“That was an evil thing to do,” said Natty quietly.

Gwilym felt him stiffen on the seat.

“Time he had a lesson!” shouted the gamekeeper. “That’s a dog ripe for hanging.”

With an oath, he launched a kick at the animal that was whimpering in pain and crawling towards them.

The wardo shook. Natty leaped through the air and landed on Red Pugh’s head. They toppled, then rolled over the heath locked in each other’s arms. A piercing cry came from Gammer who had been looking out the window at the argument. The sheep folk drew back, awed, for the two men were giants. Over and over they rolled, Red Pugh and Natty, with a flourish of arms and legs; first one on top, then the other. Mountains of solid muscle, neither could be hurt by wrestling. They jounced up, squared off, and swung at each other like prizefighters.

The women fled behind the enclosure and looked at them, frightenedly, from behind the wall. Red Pugh capered heavily, driving out his fists. His blows either slid off Natty’s face or else missed it altogether. The Gipsy’s head worked sideways, like a metronome, the fist going over his shoulder, and he was smiling.

“Give him the left,” sang out Jubal.

Red Pugh bunched himself up.

“Take that—Gipsy!”

He unwound, and drove with violence at Natty’s jaw. He missed Natty, who had crouched at that precise moment, lunged upwards, and there was an impact

like the thud of a hammer on a side of beef. Red Pugh was flung up straight into the air. He seemed to hang there poised for a moment, then toppled backward into a clump of nettles.

“You’re too easy on him,” reproved Jubal.

“Are you getting the tea ready?” asked Natty. “I’ll be ready for a cup in a minute.”

With a roar, Red Pugh scrambled up from the nettles. Mouth open in rage, and with both immense arms lifted, he charged upon Natty with intent to smash him flat.

“The Cornish trick, now,” muttered Jubal, who was leaning against the shaft of the wardo, and picking his teeth with a sprig of heather.

“Oh, Lor’—look what’s coming!” shouted Natty. “I’m as good as killed!”

But he ducked, grinning and rubbing his hands. The great bulk of Red Pugh, terrible with fury and the strength of three men, charged down upon him. Natty’s sinewy hands darted out, grasped him by the hips, then tossed him up and backward. Red Pugh curved through the air, as if he were a log, and landed on his crown, then collapsed and was still and limp.

There was silence, except for the gasps of the women, then the cry of Gammer.

“Prastee! Quick! He’s mullo as a herring, and we’ll be nashed to the gallows with a rope! Back to the road! Oh, Jubal!”

“Good, respected little people,” began Natty, putting on his white hat and bowing to the wives, as Red Pugh was carried off to lie on a pile of sacks, “he’ll be as good as new after a couple of winks.

“A pity it is to spoil your day in the open. We sought no quarrel with anyone, as you all saw with your own eyes.”

Gwilym, seeing their grave faces, which betokened doubt or resentment, rose from the driver’s box.

“Look you!” he shouted in Welsh. “Is it a sin if a man saves his dog who has eaten a rabbit? Shall a dog be killed at will by Red Pugh or Harris Gamekeeper who tug their locks to the rich gentry and are no friends to the poor folk?”

The shearers and their wives broke into a murmur. One of the women stared at Gwilym, then shouted:

“It is the little Anwyl of Moor House!”

"I came to visit you with my friends," said Gwilym. He got down and patted Sixpence on the head. "And this is a little Welsh dog who does not belong to a gamekeeper nor to a rich English landowner."

If that speech didn't get the crowd, the Ringos would be in hot water. But it struck home. Evans Woolbuyer came forward, and lifted his voice:

"Natty Horse-seller is an honest man. Who does not know him as a good Gipsy and a friend to animals? He has our good-will. The grandson of Thomas Anwyl of Moor House is with him, and we know the gwas is in safe hands."

The women brought them plates of bread and butter, slices of brawn and mugs of hot tea. The shepherds told them the state of the roads, and the shortest cut to the highway, and all displayed the utmost desire to be friendly with them. Chiefly, Gwilym knew, because of the great influence of his grandfather in the county, and because of Natty's trip-hammer fists.

"Has Thomas Anwyl come past this way lately?" asked Natty.

A woman spoke. She was a widow who lived in a cottage atop the hill, and she pointed to it.

"It was there he passed, early yesterday morning. He was driving a bowler-cart drawn by a very shaggy little pony."

"That will be Twm-Twm," said Gwilym.

"Respected lady, we thank you." Natty bowed to her. "What may we do for you in return? Tell your fortune?" he asked, for she was poor.

In reply she held up her hand, which was marred by a large wart.

"Gammer," he called out, "here's a wart for you to spell away."

His mother grasped the hand tightly, mumbled over it with a few passes, then croaked an enchantment. Natty translated the patter into Welsh:

"In the full of the moon search the field until you find a slug. Not a snail with a tent on his back, for that is the sacred bawris, the far cousin of the Rommanies; but a black slug without a home. Then say a prayer, and stick him on a thorn. Three days after the slug dies, the wart will yusher away and leave your hand like a baby's."

The woman thanked them.

"You're as good as a doctor, Natty Horse-seller," said the buyer of wool. He gave a jovial laugh. "You've cured Red Pugh of what troubled him. And it'll be easier now on all the rest of us."

“No charge for the medicine,” said Natty. “But tell him for me when he wakes up that it was lucky for him he didn’t goad me to anger.”

He mounted into the seat, and gave Gwilym a broad wink.

“Farewell to you, little crofters, sheep folk and all good people.”

The crowd waved and called out their blessings. The whip cracked, and the horses pulled on for the long climb to the brow of the mountain and the welcome sight of the highway.

“Hup-Hup, Rommany Jo-Ter”

IN the next valley they came to the same ribbon of water, but set in a green combe, with larches and a field of grass where the horses might graze. In this quietness they made camp and drank tea. The Ringos talked over their plans. Though Gwilym had not seen it, they had glimpsed a patteran on the road, with a tent-shaped mark, and from this they gathered that in Corwen was a market-fair with a show, and many Gipsies had gone ahead to foregather on the grounds.

“Centlivre’s Royal Tent Shows,” said Natty. “That’s almost saying ‘home’ to us.”

They would be in town again, inside of an hour. Gwilym listened to the three of them as they sat talking about the fire. Their journey had not been without profit, for they had sold a dozen horses in a week, the last horse disposed of just before they came to Moor House. When they were not in the country driving their trades, they were showmen. Jubal was also a farrier and veterinary. Natty had been the circus boxer and strong man.

“The Ringos,” said Natty, turning to Gwilym, “the Ringos are of that world, Young Master. Tan-bark was their nursery carpet, they cut their teeth on horseshoes, and their sky was canvas. We were a large family once—but the War killed most of us off.”

“Avo!” keened Gammer. “It was the War mullered the fine Ringos.”

“Aye,” he whispered. “We obeyed the sergeant that gave us the King’s shilling, and we shouldered the gun and marched off. There’s some of the family that never came back. They were Job Chilcott, Orpheus and Nobbutt Ringo, who were my brothers; Hamlin Smith and Petey Lee. But there’s some of us still left.

“The old ’un”—he nodded towards Gammer—“she doesn’t want to see the

family die out. That's why she watches us every inch of the way.

"The world is changed, Young Master, but the road is the same, and the trees and the sunrise, and the bridges with the same rivers flowing under them. These belong to the Rommany."

"Did the Ringos fight because the enemy tried to take them away?"

"Ah, no. Those couldn't be lost, no matter who rule the land. All the Rommany asks is a bit of hedge to sleep under, and a sack to keep the rain off his head."

His friends, Gwilym felt, had gained a little more than that, and he thought of the horses they had sold, the silver that Gammer had stuffed into the stocking after they had tinkered the pots, and there was the fatness of Sixpence's ribs.

"Birds of the Ringo feather should stick together," said Natty, fixing an eye on Gwilym.

Gwilym suddenly felt chastened and meek, as if he were again in school. Perhaps this was, in a way, a school, this life on the road with his wandering friends. And all the stories he had heard were lessons. The wisdom and the learning of the race lay not in books but in the stories such as Natty told, which were parables, and he felt they would tarry longer in his mind than what he got out of printed words.

"Not ready yet?"

"Not quite. Because what you are to hear will be a message from Egypt."

It sounded mysterious. Gwilym had not a guess what it meant, but he felt that its purport was deep and intimate, that it concerned only the Gipsies, and was to be breathed only by one of the blood to another. For a moment he wished he was home again, back with Myfi, Taid, and Twm-Twm. But it would be useless now to turn back before he found out what had become of Taid, why he had left one night, and what was the link between him and the Ringos.

"Soon we shall see what we shall see," laughed Natty. "We're out of the heather land and close to the town folk. You shall see lions and tigers and ride on the switch-back. And buy fairings. How much silver have you?"

Gwilym drew out twopence.

"Not enough," said Natty. He plucked from his waistcoat pocket a gold coin, and laid it on his palm.

“Head or tails?”

“Tails.”

Natty gave the underside of his palm a brisk thump upward. The coin disappeared at once, and though Gwilym stared into the heavens for a whole minute, he didn’t see it drop. It must have vanished into the sky. Natty got up and brushed off his clothes.

“But what’s become of it?” asked Gwilym, puzzled.

“Become of what?”

“Why, the coin.”

“You’d better count your money again.”

Gwilym clapped a hand to his pocket, drew out his money again, and there among the pennies was a golden sovereign. He stared at it in bewilderment.

“How did that get here?”

“Dunno, I’m sure,” laughed Natty. “But you’ve got it. And one of the rules of the road is, ‘Finders is keepers.’ Say nothing and spend it at the fair. Up you go, into the seat.”

The horses clambered on. The sun shone bright and hot, and the gorse and bracken were aromatic in the heat, and the warm light wind blew wave after wave of fragrance over the riders in the wardo. Natty pointed with his whip to the flowering thickets of furze and the stretches of bog myrtle.

“We must say good-bye to all this a while. Erelong we shall be out of the heather land and into the town.”

He whistled shrilly between his teeth. Jubal belabored his concertina, and inside the van Gammer stitched little bags for people to hang on their necks with charms inside them.

Gwilym found the ride enjoyable. Life on the road seemed an eternal picnic. He felt in no hurry to get to town; but the town came towards them. First, they crossed a heavy stone bridge, like the one in his village; then there was a church with an ivied steeple, and then they were on a street thronged with persons going to market.

Nobody turned to stare at them, which disappointed Gwilym a little. But there were too many carts, wagons, and traps going back and forth; and this was the hugest town he had ever seen, and he wondered if it wasn’t even bigger than London; though later he remembered it was but a fair-sized village.

At the far end of it they came to a field bulging upward with tents and marquees. Canvas and flags were snapping in the wind. Crowds swirled about the larger tents and the groups of colored wagons and motor-vans, and these had emblazoned on their sides:

CENTLIVRE'S ROYAL TENT SHOWS

The wardo trundled into the enclosure, the horses nosing their way through the villagers, then Natty found a clear space under some oaks and shouted, "Here we are!"

He and Jubal tethered the animals, removed the shaft and flung it upon the roof of the wardo. As soon as the steps were lowered, Gammer came down, dressed in a red kirtle with an embroidered shawl over her head, and vanished at once in quest of old friends.

The excitement made Gwilym dizzy. The uproar, the steam-organ of a carrousel, the crowds, the laughter, the coconut-shies, the Aunt Sally and India-rock booths, the balloons, all this set his heart pounding, and he felt it was the most stupendous spectacle in the world. He was proud, too, that he was a part of it, a partner of the famous Ringos. A trio of small children, scrubbed within an inch of their lives and dressed in Sunday finery, came up and, clutching hands, looked at the wardo with awe, and then at Gwilym who was sitting on the steps.

"Look! That's a Gipsy."

"You don't think he will carry us off, do you?"

"Hush! He might understand Welsh, and you'll put an idea into his head."

A nurse pounced on the trio, bestowed slaps and, clucking like a hen, hustled them off from danger.

Jubal already had the pot slung over a fire, and when the water was hot, Natty hung a bit of looking-glass on the wheel and stropped a razor. He shaved himself to the blood; then the two men dressed. Natty came out first, in a gray surtout with a pinched-in waist, boots of Russian leather, riding breeches, a green foulard scarf, and a white top-hat. Gwilym was astonished. He couldn't recognize his friend, who could have changed places with a sporting Earl.

"Aye, that's him, Young Master," said Jubal with a laugh. "Natty is the word. Goes for his name and his appearance. Reg'lar swell, isn't he?"

"It's only a part of the show," said Natty with a grin.

He gave Gwilym a card printed with his name and a mark.

“Flash this anywhere, and any tent will be open to you—and welcome. You go about and take your fun where you find it, like the pishom-bee finds the honey. You’ve got the silver, the time and the opportunity.”

He slapped his boots with a riding-crop, and was just about to stride on when a voice greeted them.

“Well, I never! It’s the blessed Ringos!”

A boisterous, laughing woman, tall and dark, dressed in town clothes, had come up to them.

“And so it is the Ringos, after all!” she smiled, as they shook hands. “Welcome you two, and Gammer also. Bless us, we were afraid you wouldn’t come afore we drommed it to the Sirmihatch.”

“No fear! We never forget our friends—nor our kind-hearted and beautiful Mals. Lora—Madame Zangarelli—meet a pal of our’n.”

She turned to Gwilym.

“Sarishan!” she said, in greeting.

“His nev is Gwilym. And he’s of the Anwyls.”

Madame Zangarelli showed interest. “Not—”

“Aye, Thomas Anwyl’s grandson.”

“Sup mi-Duvel! And can he rakker the Rommanies? Where is Thomas?”

The three looked at Gwilym, and Natty spoke, gravely, in a whisper.

“By all accounts, he’s gone to the drom again, with cart and horse. Where to, we don’t know. But we left the patteran. It’s Gammer says we shall come across him in four days. And I think we shall see him at the Sirmihatch.”

Madame Zangarelli nodded. “Gone on message of Egypt. We shall all be there—all those of the blood in Wales. But it’s a woesome place, Lake Geirionydd, and far for those that haven’t a graia to pull their cart and who must pad the hoof.”

“Chee-chee!” reproved Natty. “It’s quiet, and the quieter the better, and King Pendy Bosvil chose it out of all places in the world.”

Natty and Madame Zangarelli, whom he called Lora, each took Gwilym by an arm and they walked through the throng.

“I’ll show him to the carrousel, Natty, and give him a start mashing around.”

“Aye, do that. I’ve a bit of sparring to do at four o’clock and I must stretch my muscles a little. Kushto bak!”

“Good luck!” said Lora.

Swinging his riding-crop, Natty paraded towards the big tent, striding like an athlete, with hat pushed back, his strong, cameo features dark above and ivory below, where he had shaved, an imposing figure, gazed at by all who passed by.

“You picked the right pals to go with on the drom,” smiled Lora. “And Natty is a boro koorin mush, a surrelo mush—a strong, fighting boxer, very bold and fierce. Come along with me. The merry-go-round is my lay.”

It was not easy to pick one’s way through the mob. School was out, and the children were there in hundreds, from all the villages about; and because it was Fair Day, the drovers, graziers, and farmers were thick, and there were wives, servant-girls, village youths, and soldiers from the barracks, jostling, talking, shaking hands, and buying things at the booths. There were maizey-pop booths, wheels-of-fortune tents, at which, if you were lucky, fortune favored you with a pound of sugar; dukkerin booths, with serpent-eyed old women in them reading palms or casting the future from tea-leaves. Customers were hurling coconuts at Black Sambo or Aunt Sally, who bounced up again when they were knocked down by terrific blows that did not disturb their smiles in the least.

There was a mixed noise of whistles, tin trumpets, calliopes, yells of venders, roars from the animals’ cages, and cries of frightened infants. Gwilym wove through it in a kind of trance, and thought it heaven to live in the midst of such scenes and harmony. Before one open tent they paused, for the crowd was particularly dense. A Cheap Jack was selling off plated trinkets, juggling them with skill and amusing the hearers with his jests.

“Now then, ladies and gemm’en, afore I let go any more of these—and it cuts me to the heart to sell ’em, you must hear about the little Gipsy shaver who went to the Great Village. That’s London. With his father he walked down the street and they stopped before a window all full of shining things. Gentles, he had never seen a jewelry shop before this.

“He was a wery honest little shaver. And all this worried him.

“‘Oh, Father,’ he cries. ‘What a terrible great thief that man must be to have got so many spoons, forks, silver cups, clocks, and watches.’

“That little shaver, ladies and gemm’en, grew up honest and honest—until he was as honest as the famous Natty Ringo, the boxer. Yes, he grew up,

and where is he today? Right here before you!” The Cheap Jack tapped his chest, and discharged a sly wink at Natty. “So every word he says is as good as the Bible. Nah, then, ladies and gemm’en, here’s a lovely gold watch—worth a full ten pounds—and all I ask is tenpence!”

Gwilym and Lora moved on, he mystified, and the woman smiling.

“Well, it couldn’t be real gold, could it, Madame Zangarelli?”

“Perhaps there may be a speck in the paint on it,” she replied. “And as for the tick-tick—well, that might be a hukkaben.”

“A trick?”

“Aye, or a tin box with a cricket in it.”

Laughing at this, they came to a roped open space just as there arrived a one-legged man on a crutch, pushing a wheelbarrow on which was a roll of carpet. He was an old soldier with a wife and two small boys in tight, one-piece suits that covered them from head to heel. Hobbling about inside the space, he laid the carpet flat. He beat a little drum, the wife blew on a fife, and the boys leaped, tumbled, did cart-wheels and walked on their heads. They did not perform very well, as if they were underfed. Their garb was patched in several places, and the wife was sad-faced.

A few persons tossed a copper or two upon the carpet. Lora threw a sixpence, and Gwilym his stray pennies.

“A lucky man that Rory is,” she said. “Look at the two strong hands he has to beat the drum.”

That was a philosophical way of looking at it, Gwilym thought. He was elated at the idea of having met so remarkable and kind a woman as Lora. How fortunate the Ringos were in their friends. They walked on with her arm across his shoulder, and she pointed out to him all the great persons who belonged to the show: the head canvasman, the gaffer of the animal tent, the Negro elephant trainer and the Gipsies so rich that they owned their booths. And as he saw the lifting of hats and the smiles cast in her direction, he was sure she was the most famous woman in the world, hardly less than the Queen in London.

“There’s my wardo,” she told him. “You’ll come in after you have a ride. The Ringos’ll know where to find you. And this is my merry-go-round.”

Here was a dazzling palace of glass, with a frieze of life-sized angels and lions in papier-mâché, and a pagoda roof done in gold carvings. About it was a circle of unicorns, swans, camels, and horses, rearing and plunging up and down on brass rods, to the thundering music of a steam-organ, a music louder

than ten brass bands. The huge sign, held up by a pair of cupids, bore the name, “Madame L. Zangarelli, Proprietress.”

As the platform slowed down, she called out: “Mike!”

A Gipsy, with muffler and a cap resting on one ear, came out from the menagerie.

“Here’s a new pal of our’n, Mike. He’ll be riding. When he’s had enough, show him to my wardo. And first get him some hokey-pokey and monkey-nuts.”

Mike dashed off and hurried back with the purchases.

“There y’are, sir. Choose your mount. Most young gentlemen like a hornie.”

Whereupon Gwilym mounted a unicorn. Mike wove in and out, collecting pennies; the steam organ brayed, the platform turned, and the crowds, booths and trees began to joggle, spin, then race like a kaleidoscope.

Gwilym rode dizzily for an hour or so, then dismounted. He had lost all sense of direction, and Mike pointed out to him Lora’s wardo. She was now dressed in Gipsy costume, with shawl and earrings, and her little table was set for luncheon.

“In time for tea and a toasted crumpet,” she said. “Sit you down right here on the box.”

She made him recount all he had seen and done on the grounds. Jolly and munching a buttery crumpet, she told him all he should see. And on no account was he to miss watching Natty giving his show in the big tent.

“That alone is worth going on the road a fortnight,” she said.

“Oh, a fortnight? That’s pretty long. I really don’t think I could stay away a fortnight.”

“And why not?” she laughed. “That’s what I’d like to know. You’ll learn nothing in a lesser time than that.”

“Indeed? I thought I had.”

That stirred her to an amused laugh again. Then she watched him gravely. He was sure that she knew more than he had told her; it was probable that Jubal had told her of his quest, why he had left the farm. None of the Gipsies, except Gammer once or twice in a casual way, had so much as breathed the name of Thomas Anwyl, as if a family or tribal secret were involved. Yet he felt sure that the relations between Taid and the Ringos, though mysterious, were not unfriendly.

“Have you silver?” she asked, after he had emptied his cup.

“Oh, plenty.”

“Not that you’ll be needing much. But if you do, you’ve only to ask Lora.”

“Thank you—Lora,” he said, rising from his seat.

“Come here any time after you’ve seen the matches. I shall see you in the morning, anyway. I’ll show you where the tent is.”

She directed him from the steps of the wardo, and he walked on. The tent was large, with banners across the front. Behind a tall stand at the entrance was a red-faced showman in a velveteen coat, and he was delivering an eloquent speech to the crowd.

“Step right inside, gentlemen! The Champion will oblige. One golden sovereign to anybody who can out-box Champion Natty Ringo. Box him any way you like, turf rules, London prize-ring rules, Markis of Queensbery rules, or no rules at all!

“Stay it out three rounds, and get your golden sovereign! Knock him down, and you become famous all over creation.

“Inside is the great show. Only tuppence, and you see Centlivre’s galaxy of breath-taking wonders: the Zulu Giant, the mighty boa constrictors of the Amazon, the Bearded Lady, Monsieur Ziklavala the knife-thrower, and the trained fleas. Best of all, Natty Ringo, the two-fisted Champion of Wales!”

A large swarthy fellow, with shoulders a yard across, gave a laugh.

“It’s no Gipsy who’s Champion of Wales,” he shouted. “Nor any Englishman, neither! I’ll prove it!”

“D’you hear that, ladies and gentlemen!” called the barker. “That’s the way to talk. What this land needs is sporting blood, and here’s plenty of it. Sir, will you oblige me with your name?”

“Tom Pengelly, of Rhos. Alias the Crab.”

“The Crab!” “Bravo!” “Three cheers!”

The challenger was the village butcher, a truculent boor, famed for his ill-temper and his fights with the drovers and cattle-sellers every Fair Day. He had no friends, but in the face of a stranger who dared the fighting supremacy of the village, the whole crowd was with him.

“In that case,” said the showman, “you step right in free. Be the guest of Centlivre’s Royal Tent Shows. The privilege of seeing all the wonders and

boxing Natty Ringo won't cost you a penny."

The Crab pushed in with an indifferent shrug. The bystanders made a rush to follow him, throwing their pennies at the box and pushing in without even waiting for tickets. It was a gleeful surge; some got in without paying at all, and Gwilym was among these, and found himself swept along, like a cork in a freshet.

Hundreds of spectators stood about the high, roped arena. At the far end of the tent, the Zulu Giant and his fellow wonders sat neglected; no one had eyes for anything but the imposing figure of Natty Ringo in his boxing suit, with gloves on his hands. Three or four hardy challengers climbed in.

Each touched gloves with the Champion, by way of shaking hands. Then they squared off, to clump about and spar with utmost good humor, for they were merely country lads out for jollity and the applause of their friends. They romped like bears under the blazing naphtha lamps, to the laughter and jeers of the onlookers.

Natty had more fun than any of them. He pretended they were giants who could knock him as flat as a pancake if they chose; and his comedy antics as he dodged their wild blows, and his bellows of simulated pain when they landed on him, made it the most comical show Gwilym had ever seen.

Nobody was taken in, of course, except the amateur boxers who thought themselves very grand fellows, quite as good as the Champion. And after each bout, Natty shook hands, made a little speech telling them what wonderful athletes they were, and that they were getting so clever and strong that next time he came he would have to refuse their challenges.

"Playing with them, he is," Gwilym heard a villager say. There were murmurs of approval about him. "That's a boxer who ought to be in Ameriky, he could get a thousand pounds a night."

The ring was cleared of all except Natty, who bowed and with his glove pushed back a lock of hair.

"Any other gentleman here tonight who'd like a bit of exercise? Who wants that gold piece with King Jarge's head on it? It's just crying to get into somebody's pocket."

"I'll take it!" growled someone at the entrance.

The Crab pushed through the mob. He seized the ropes and swung himself into the ring.

"Think yer the Champion, do yer? Got yer picture outside 'n' everything. A

bit of imperdence, that is! Kiss good-bye to yer gold piece.”

After peeling off his waistcoat and rolling up his sleeves, the Crab donned the gloves. Natty came forward to help him with the wrist-straps, but the challenger pushed him away, and brushed aside the offer of a hand held in amity.

“Now then, defend yourself, Gipsy!”

The Crab sparred, making fast rushes. He was the only professional in the lot. His blows would have stunned a bullock. He grew more and more furious; he charged head down, smiting and grunting as if he were in a slaughter-house. Natty ducked, squirmed, pranced like a dancing-master, intent on nothing, it seemed, but to escape the bulk of solid muscle that came at him with the force of a battering ram.

True, he didn’t get hurt very much. The boxing-gloves were as large as pillows, and so far neither had a bruise. But he wasn’t giving a good account of himself up there, with everybody looking on to see him perform miracles and live up to his fame spread out so grandly on the poster outside.

The crowd jeered and hooted.

“Don’t hurt him, Gipsy!”

“Don’t kill him! The Crab’s got a pore old mother to support!”

“Go back to tinkering kettles, Gipsy!”

“Call it quits, Natty, and come down!”

The jests and groans and jeers continued. Natty kept up his prancing and managed to ward off the Crab’s blows. The bell rang. The round was over, and the cheers were deafening. The Butcher of Rhos had superbly upheld his reputation. After a brief rest the bell rang, and the Crab shot from his corner, arms held out at full length, his fists as menacing as sledge-hammers.

“Hurrah for the new Champion!” burst from a hundred throats.

This was the beginning of the end. No mortal would have thought Natty’s life worth a penny. He smiled wanly, too, as if he were sorry he had come into the ring in the first place. But it was too late now. The Crab drove out five blows in quick succession. All grazed the top of Natty’s head. The Gipsy’s knees were bent, he seemed to have shrunk in fear. It was very sad for Gwilym. His hopes for a triumph had faded. Every second he expected to see Natty laid out senseless. Where now was the wonderful boxer of the moors who had conquered Red Pugh?

Gwilym readied himself to slip away. He gave one final look to see if all was over.

“Had enough?” shouted the Crab.

“Not quite. I’ll give you just a love tap,” said Natty, thrusting out his glove.

It was a slight blow, but the Crab’s jaw slid from left to right, then jolted back. Another poke, and his jaw slid from right to left, and as a stream of red trickled down his chin the crowd became silent and the Crab paused, bewildered.

“Wouldn’t hurt a dove,” Natty reassured him.

The Crab tossed his mane, bellowed, then drove upon Natty with both fists upraised, ready to administer the mortal blow and put a stop to all this dancing-master’s foolery. He struck out, with clenched teeth. But Natty wasn’t there; he had sidestepped, then rushed in. There was a report like the exploding of a paper bag. The Crab rose into the air, fantastically high, then dropped over the ropes onto the heads of the crowd.

“As I thought,” said the villager. “Natty was just playing with him. We’d better go. There’s a storm brewing.”

The crowd roared in fury. That was no way to treat its idol. Someone tossed a rock into the arena. Sticks were brandished, the uproar swelled out the tent, and the mob rushed for the ropes.

Gwilym slipped out. After the glare of the naphtha lamps the world was dark, though torches flared at the booths. He cupped his hands and released the cry:

“Rom-many jo-ter! Hup-hup, Rom-many jo-ter!”

He ran to the merry-go-round and shouted it into the din of the calliope.

“Where away?” shouted Mike, leaping from the platform.

“At the ring. Where Natty is!”

Mike uttered the cry, running through the field; it spread like a flame, and the Gipsies came tearing from the tents, the booths, the switch-back and the Ferris wheel. They came by scores, shouting, wielding clubs and tent-pegs, they fought into the side-show, first ripping down a wall of canvas to give egress to the mob. Both sides fought with will and vigor. Men were trampled. In the ring Natty was engaged with half a dozen stout villagers, wrestling with all of them at once.

“The peelers! Run for it.”

The tent emptied with a rush as the police drove in through the side entrance. Gwilym was not quick enough and was grabbed by the ear.

“I’ve got him! This is the one that started the cry.”

“Good! The Magistrate will give him a year in the workhouse. Tell the Chief we’ve got him.”

That official came in and looked about him grimly as if surveying a battlefield. He was a soldierly-looking man, with a bleak eye, a slash of a mouth, and yet with a jaunty air, perhaps because of the bowler hat at one side of his head and a stick under his arm. Natty, having jumped down from the ring, came towards him, slapping his hands, which were numbed after much contact with skulls, to start the circulation going.

“What have you been doing?” said the official sternly. “Didn’t you know the War was over?”

He bent his brows at Natty, then his face relaxed into a thin smile.

“Sergeant Ringo of the Fusiliers, I presume.”

“The same. It’s a long time since we met last, Captain Lewis. Our regiment was pretty well chopped up then.”

“But you were luckier than I,” said the Captain. “You’re still good for a battle or two, but”—he tapped his leg with his stick—“this isn’t as sound as it was. By the way, what was all the big row about just now?”

“Oh, half a shindy. Nothing much. It could have been worse.”

“Pardon, Captain,” said the policeman who had Gwilym by the arm. “It’s this youngster started all the riot. He was shouting a kind of battle cry all over the place.”

“I was not,” protested Gwilym. “I gave the ‘joter’ shout to put a stop to it.”

“So it was you?” Natty broke in surprise. “That did the trick. Thanks, Young Master.”

“There’s some freemasonry in all this, I gather,” said the chief constable. Then he turned to Gwilym’s captor. “Let the boy go. Where’s the Crab?”

“Took to the hospital, sir, on a stretcher.”

“A good place for him. See that he is held for disturbing the peace. And turn every showman loose.”

The two men strolled on, Natty with surtout over his boxing garb, and as

they were headed for a tavern, Gwilym left and wandered on his own hook. The excitement had died down. The Ferris wheel was revolving again; more visitors were streaming in after an early dinner, and after another round of the coconut-shy booths and the Cheap Jack tents, he jumped upon the platform of the carrousel and mounted a unicorn. It began to turn, the steam-organ jangled, then gnashed out its tinny melody of "Rule, Britannia." Mike, weaving in and out amongst the patrons, collecting pennies, appeared with palm outstretched; then seeing who it was, passed on with a broad wink. And Gwilym knew that he was now of the brotherhood of the road, as good as one of the true blood of the Rommany.

Horses and Hukkabens

GWILYM awoke beneath the wardo, where he had slept under a dew-beaded robe with Sixpence snuggled at his feet. He had overslept, after the excitement of the evening and a long visit to Lora's, where the Ringos had foregathered for tea. It was still early, the rose-tinted flush still lingered on the horizon. But the grounds were vacant. Only a litter of paper and here and there a smoking heap of embers would have told anyone Centlivre's show had come and gone, and the whole affair had not been a dream.

Jubal was frying bacon at the tripod fire; Gammer and Natty were inside the wardo. They were talking with someone.

"The bright wishes of the morning to you," said Natty, sitting on the steps as Gwilym came up. Captain Lewis was also on the steps, with a pipe between his teeth, a surprisingly early visitor. "You've met the Captain, haven't you?" he asked with a grin.

The visitor made Gwilym a military bow.

"I'm obliged to you for helping to quell the riot yesterday. Natty here would have been nursing a broken head if you hadn't sprung the alarm. I don't mind a little riot now and then, myself. If there weren't riots, we police would be out of a job. But I hate to see a friend of mine get bunged up."

He and Natty laughed, and Jubal appeared with mugs of coffee and strips of bacon on rusks. They resumed their talk, which was chiefly about horses and life with the show, which Natty had joined as a very young man. Gwilym listened intently.

Gammer Ringo, ambitious for the future of her twin sons, had sent them to learn about horses from Mr. Centlivre, who bought all his animals from their family. There they learned forge-work, tinkering, the compounding of medicines and salves. At the age of nineteen they were in command of the

Centlivre stables and menagerie.

They had their own great wardo, with slings in it for ill beasts, dogs, lion and leopard cubs. They also doctored the pets at the villages the show stopped at. This gained for them the devotion of hundreds of the four-footed gentry. So wherever the Ringos' wagon went, and it traveled everywhere from Caerleon-on-Usk to Chester, and from Pwllheli to the green edge of Glamorganshire, it was followed by ex-patients among the village dogs, trotting behind in the dust, reluctant to part company with them at the end of the street.

Natty's muscles were so uncommonly large that Mr. Centlivre prophesied a great career for him. He made the lad wrestle with the stake men, and box with a powerful Negro farrier and with Samson Lee, the Gipsy who was famed for his prowess in weight-lifting and who punched the bag in the side-show.

"Then he sent me down to Cornwall to wrestle with the big Cornishman, Champion John Tregurtha," said Natty. "And it was about time. I got it into my head that I was the strongest man in England. Old John—he was fat and bald—he threw me almost up to the moon the first thing. But I came down—aye, I came down! And I stayed on in Cornwall for months, wrestling with him."

Mr. Centlivre read the painfully scrawled letters of his protégé, and wept with pride. At the end of five months, after Natty had pinned his tutor's shoulders to the ground, he returned to the show as the Champion Wrestler, with his face on a poster.

"It's all in fun," said Natty. "My serious vocation is horseman."

"That's serious enough," Jubal explained. "A wrestler or a boxer is only a man. But a horse may be a Percheron, an Arab, a racer, a Shire, a Clydesdale, or a hackney. Or he may be a pony, Connemara, Uist, Welsh or Barra, or Shetland or Orkney. There's a lot to a horse, Captain. There's their manners, training, shoes and ills—no man, hardly, knows all the hukkabens and the ins and outs of the horse lay. There was only one big Gryemengro—meaning a horse-master—who did."

He fell silent after a swift glance from Natty.

"Was he a Rommany, too?" asked the visitor, with interest.

Jubal averted his eyes. Then he spoke as if to himself:

"Aye, one of the Ringos."

"What became of him?"

“Oh,” said Jubal, unwillingly, “he turned Gorgio. Turned about into a fine county gentleman, and had no more to do with the drom folk and his own blood-kin from that day to this. That was what marrying a pale city lady did for him.”

“That was a very great pity, I think.”

“Worse than that, Captain, for those of us left.”

The visitor got up, straightened his shoulders, and looked beyond the trees.

“Can I give any of you a lift? The youngster, perhaps?”

“Thanks, no. We’ll be there in a day or two and look at your horse.”

“The place will be yours. Adiós, my friends.”

They all shook hands with him, and he was gone. The next minute they heard the purring of his motor-car as it vanished up the road.

“Who was the Gryemengro?” asked Gwilym. “The one Jubal was telling about?”

“Dunno where he is,” said Natty, with a faint smile as he began to lift the harness. “Maybe we’ll come across him.”

Soon everything was stowed, the steps were pulled up, and the wardo began its new voyage. Natty whistled between his teeth, and Gammer, elated at being on the move, sang a tune in her cracked voice:

“Sa o star o buena grye,
Me kamavo tute!”

“Sup mi-Duvel!” said Natty. “It’s fine to be out of the town again, and not feel that a roof would come down on your head any moment. There were too many roofs about. We had bad luck, too, what with the shindy and that menagerie come before us a week ago. By my father’s hand!—it’s time we went.”

The brothers discussed all the events of their brief sojourn on the grounds. Gwilym listened, though it was difficult because Gammer was singing and crooning loud enough to put them to sleep. But what he did hear was very precious. Lora Zangarelli was going to marry Mike—even though he was a Spanish Gipsy, and his real name was Miguelito Rojas.

Centlivre’s, as Natty had said, was a second home to them, and after having met up with old friends they hadn’t seen for months, they fell to talking of past days, and they dropped from English to deep Rommany. For an hour they

talked thus, as the wardo rolled past endless green hedgerows, cottages, and farms.

Gwilym drowsed, thinking vaguely of Lora Zangarelli and her companions, how they had scattered after the fair and taken to devious roads, where they tinkered, “dukkered fortunes,” or traded horses. At the end of the week, in behest to a summons, they would be thrown together again at the Sirnihatch on the shores of Lake Geirionydd.

“That poor gentleman,” said Natty aloud. “He is in sad trouble with his horse.”

“What happened to it?” asked Gwilym.

“It’s divvio—as mad as a rabbit with fleas. And it’s gone terrible rampageous.”

“I should think he would sell it.”

Natty laughed. “Not he. He’s very fond of his horse. Didn’t the creature win for him many silver cups and medals? It’s still good for another hamper of cups if it’s cured. Though his hostler says no, and has been wanting to buy it for just horsemeat price.”

“There’s some hukkaben there,” said Jubal. “Some funny tricks we’ll have to look into.”

“Who knows?” smiled Natty, cracking his whip. “But it’ll be a jolly visit. Captain Lewis, Young Master, has a fine great house, and so many pheasants that they run all over the place like hens. He lives alone and thinks more of his horse than almost anything in the wide world.”

“It would be pleasant to stay there a week,” said Gwilym.

“A week! Two days is plenty. A week is far too much for us folk,” Natty added with seriousness, as if a deep subject had been touched. “Far too long. That would be like going against one’s religion or blood, a wrong thing to do. And no man can be happy who does not keep to the path he was brought up to follow. Something gets twisted inside him and days will come when he feels he has lost more than he will ever profit.”

“I’ve heard of some men doing it,” said Jubal.

“Aye, but you never know what’s in their hearts. And sometimes the tug is heavy, and the smell of the heath wind pulls them out for days, perhaps weeks, at a time.”

Then, for some reason, Gwilym’s thoughts drifted to Taid, and he

remembered the far look in his eyes as he stood at the gate of Moor House, looking far out across the heather to the sea and the mist-hidden road in the distance.

They were coming through a village and children began to run by the side of the wardo, looking up at them. Jubal reached for his concertina and played noisy music, to the gladness of the children and the smiles of the village folk who came out to their doors to listen.

“That’s expected of us, Young Master,” said Natty. “If it isn’t music, it’s a bit of juggling, or perhaps a dance. It makes life gayer for people that have to stay boxed up inside four walls.”

“I can dance a little,” Gwilym told them. “So can Myfi. Taid showed us a step.”

“I’ll wager it was the Morris dance,” Natty remarked.

“That’s it.”

“Then you must know of Orpheus Lee, the gorgeousest dancer ever born. The fairies oiled his ankles when he was a baby, and that made his legs as supple as eels, and strong, too. He could trip through any dance you ever heard of, and more besides. He could turn a somersault and come down so fast he didn’t miss a beat of the drum.

“It was Michaelmas Night, and Orpheus and his family—a very large one for he had four boys and six daughters—were coming past a large country house. The lights were on for a handsome dinner party in the parlor, butlers were carrying in wine, and fiddlers were tuning up for an evening of strong music. But when the gentleman inside heard the creaking of the wardo, he came out and, seeing it was Orpheus, said:

“ ‘I have guests here, Orpheus. And will you step us a good Morris dance on my lawn?’

“Orpheus came out and jigged and spun and whirled like a sprite, and so noiseless that he might have been a cat. You could just hear the thin beat of his shoes on the flagstone, hardly any louder than the swish of dead leaves. He danced with his hands in his pockets, and as he danced he admired the large, beautiful house.

“ ‘How happy I’d be if this house were mine!’ he said to his family.

“The gentleman heard this and said aloud, so the guests might hear, ‘It’s yours, when you dance right through the stone you’re jiggling on.’

“After the guests had gone in to dinner, Orpheus pulled up the stone and saw it was an old step all hollow underneath, and thin on top.

“So he clapped iron horseshoes to his feet and danced so hard and noisily that the guests and the people in the village thought it was thundering. Not once did he stop. It came on to rain, and he still danced, with his wife and his children in turn holding an umbrella over his head.

“ ‘That’s enough dancing, Orpheus,’ said the gentleman. ‘Here’s a sovereign for your trouble.’

“ ‘I’m not done dancing yet,’ Orpheus told him. And the guests laughed and began to lay wagers.

“All that day and all night he danced, and by day-break he had danced a hole right through the stone, big enough for a dog to crawl through. The gentleman was honest, and rich besides, so he gave Orpheus the beautiful house, and the guests stayed on two days and nights to hold a proper celebration. And that’s the true story about Orpheus, they tell me. Anyway, it’s the Rommany saying that a stone with a hole in it spells good luck.”

“Did this Orpheus,” asked Gwilym, “go back to the drom with his folk?”

“Aye, after a while. He sold the fine house back to the gentleman who had moved to an inn and was glad to get it back. With the bagful of sovereigns he got in payment, he bought a new wardo and two horses for every man in his tribe, and that tribe of Lee folk numbered a hundred.”

“I knew a Rommany once,” said Jubal, putting away his concertina, “who couldn’t play nor sing nor dance. He felt sad ’cause he had no gift to please the town folk. He might have been a bird flying through the village, so unnoticed he was.

“So he painted his horse, green one week, red the next, blue after that, and so on. It was a dreadful shock to the town folk at first. Then they used to wonder what color it would be next time. This gave them something to argue about and look forward to. Cost him a lot of trouble to wash off the horse each time, but it was worth it. He climbed to be famous, everybody knew him, and he tinkered more pots than anyone in the whole county.”

It came on to rain. The downpour fell with the slant of bayonets, and Natty hung a tarpaulin over the front of the wardo, just low enough so that the three of them could peer over it. The rain sluiced and drummed on the vehicle, and jounced up from the roads in a thick vapor. Here was thin, grazing country, strewn with boulders and fern, where fed sheep with crows riding on their backs. Here and there shepherds stood about, under dripping cloaks, and

looking as bedraggled as scarecrows.

The sky thickened, grew blacker, and lowered to the ground; inky pools spread out on the road, and the horses settled into a heavy, splashing walk. Their breaths rising in the chill air cast a cloud into the wardo. The dampness was penetrating, and Gwilym shivered behind the tarpaulin. He thought of the comfortable warm kitchen at Moor House, with the peat fire crackling, Myfi curled up in her chair with a book, and Shan singing as she laid the table for dinner. He felt homesick. Were it not that he had his pride to keep up before the Ringos, and that any time he might come across his grandfather, he would for a penny leap out and trudge homeward on foot.

“The rain is heavier, Jubal,” said Natty. “It’s a-falling like bricks on the wardo. Sounds cozy-like.”

“More’n you can say for rain on thatch, which is just straw and leaks. Those poor farmers get drowned out in their beds.”

A horn sounded, then a motor-van screamed past, and was gone in a twinkling. Another followed, plastered over with mud. Gwilym thought how handsome the wardo looked in comparison, with its washed paint, the Percherons glistening like porpoises, and the harness brass still shining. The worse the weather grew, the gayer the spirits of the Ringos. Rain dashed into their faces; Gwilym ducked and wrapped a muffler about his chin.

Jubal gave a prolonged howl, then trolled a song:

Natty joined in, with a voice twice as loud:

They sang this over and over again, and Gammer inside the wardo joined in, fitting Rommany words to the tune. They sang themselves warm and dry-throated. Then Gammer handed out mugs of hot tea through the window and slices of bread and cold meat, so the drive resolved itself into a kind of picnic.

The horses clumped on patiently, and by nightfall they came to a long, gray house, roofed with slate, at the edge of a moor. It was a respectable but bleak habitation, with a wind-break of elms in front and a high fence with an iron gate. Here the wardo stopped. Natty and Jubal put out their heads to study the estate.

“That’s where the poor, mad horse lives,” said Natty.

“And where we’ll stay a week if luck is with us,” murmured Jubal.

He jumped out, swung open the gate, and the wardo came through. It wound up a winding, gravelly path that led to the granary. Jubal thumped on the door and hallooed. No answer; he went around, and they could hear him shout

again. Someone came from the hostlers' cottage: a weazened little fellow, a typical jockey, in a striped waistcoat and high boots. He looked at them with displeasure. It was clear that they had routed him from a warm fireside.

"Who will you be wanting to see?" he asked.

His manner was truculent. It was clear to Gwilym that in his eyes they were anything but welcome. The hostler was a Londoner, and looked very like a domestic servant, a coachman, perhaps, and his neatness and the extraordinary waistcoat made Gwilym feel uncouth and suspect.

"Whom did you suppose?" said Natty, dropping to the ground. "It's old friends we are, pals of Captain Lewis. Isn't he in?"

"He's in, all right," muttered the hostler.

"We thought we'd drop in for a cup of tea. Sorry, I haven't a card."

The hostler's eye roved over them, over the wardo that was a handsome vehicle of its kind, then over the two magnificent horses, well cared for and accoutered at expense.

"Percherons?" he asked. "As good a pair as I've seen in a dog's age."

His attitude was patronizing, the tone that of a servant to beggars or wandering road folk asking for a crust of bread.

"Indeed?" asked Natty, in feigned surprise. "I thought they were just plow horses. Worth no more than three guineas apiece. It takes a man like you, sir, with a very sharp eye, to judge horseflesh."

The hostler smiled. Natty's flattery had thrown him off guard. Gwilym knew that a hundred guineas each would be nearer the worth of the animals, and he saw through Natty's little game.

"Well, if you'd like to leave them here," said the hostler, pursing his lips, as if to hint that he was doubtful of his good judgment in the offer, "I might offer you six guineas for the pair. Maybe a shilling or two more."

Natty pushed back his hat and scratched his head.

"That's very kind of you, sir. I didn't know they were worth so much. I'll think it over. Every little helps, and we rather fancy the idea of buying a motor-van. We're just simple tinker folk, and tinkering isn't what it used to be."

"Better stick to it," said the hostler, with condescension. "Every man must stick to his trade. Mine's horses."

"It must be very fine to know something about horses," said Natty. He shook his head regretfully. "If a man did, he could pick up an honest penny, going up and down the road like we do."

The rain was still plumping hard, and the water guttered from Natty's hat.

"If you don't mind, sir, perhaps you will give Captain Lewis my compliments, and say Mr. Nathaniel Ringo is here."

The hostler's frown returned.

"You wait here," he said crisply, after surveying them again.

He walked slowly to the house, twirling his umbrella, and going the round-about to avoid the puddles in the road.

"A foxy one, that hostler is," gasped Jubal, trying to overcome his mirth.

"Either that, or a good actor."

Natty looked sorrowfully at his Percherons.

"Forgive me, my gryas," he said. "It's a good thing you don't know much English, or your feelings would have been hurt, my cheapening you like that. Six guineas for the pair of you! Lor'! I wouldn't sell poor Sixpence for twice as much."

The three of them gazed up the windy, elm-lined road in the direction the hostler had gone. Then the hostler reappeared, this time hurrying as fast as he could.

"Up this way, Mr. Ringo, please. You will take the lady to the house, and perhaps one of you will give me a hand in putting up the animals."

They drove up, Gammer got out, and Captain Lewis emerged to lead her into the house. Gwilym and Natty followed, and Jubal drove back to the stables with the hostler.

The house was more like a castle. Servants appeared, and after a greeting from the host, Gwilym was led off upstairs to a room.

"You may wash and rest here, sir, if you wish. Tea will be ready in an hour, and the gong will ring."

Alone, Gwilym scrubbed himself at the wash-hand stand, combed his locks, and peered into a mirror. He had not seen himself thus since he left home, and he could hardly repress a start of astonishment. The sun and wind had darkened his face; the hue was not the mahogany tan of the Ringos, but close to it, when he turned his face away from the light. The loose green kerchief

about his neck, which Natty had given him, with the ends drawn through a brass ring, was the sign manual of the drom folk. He looked at his dark hands and rough woolen clothes. The road, he felt, had assuredly taken him now for its own, and for long he stood pondering. Someone rapped at the door.

“Come in.”

Another maid put in her head. Her glance betokened curiosity, or was it disapproval? The master had strange visitors that day. There had been strange goings-on for weeks, for that matter, what with the mad horse. And the advent of four Gipsies, one of them certainly a witch, did not hint that affairs were improving.

“What is it?” he asked.

“Iss ready the tea,” she said in English, which she found an awkward tongue.

“Da iawn—very good,” he replied.

Her start, and look of wonder, at the Welsh response, amused him. He followed her downstairs and into the oak-paneled dining room with its heavy furniture and dresser. The Ringos were already seated, dressed in their finest garb, Natty in his cords looking a country gentleman. Captain Lewis was in genial spirits, elated at having road folk at his board. Between Gipsies and the upper gentry was a bond of feeling unknown to the peasants. Both were adventurous, loving travel, the outdoors and horses, and rebelled against being tied down too closely to the soil. The joys, or routine tasks, of tilling, sowing, and reaping, they left to others to perform.

“Close the door when you leave the room,” said Captain Lewis.

The door clicked as the maid went out. The Captain sliced a boiled leg of mutton. There was also a dish of turnips and a bowl of caper sauce.

“Countryside faring, Natty,” he said. “You’ll feel at home, eh?”

“More at home with turnips than with mutton,” Natty laughed.

They dined leisurely, passing about the dishes without help of a servant. The meal over, each cleared a space for his elbows, and pipe smoke went up. Gammer sat beatified in her tall chair, gazing at the white napery, the silver, and the remnants of the banquet. The rain pounded at the windows, with soughing of the wind and a slow dragging of elm branches on the roof. Gwilym cracked walnuts. Talk began, and Natty cast an eye on the bay window.

"I once heard of a race that was throwed, Captain. The jockey and the owner put their heads together and agreed to hold back the horse. Not a soul heard them, but next morning it was all over the town. So they didn't race it after all. It just wasn't any use."

"Nobody heard them? Then how'd the others find out?"

"They didn't hear anything, no. But they 'saw' the words. Saw their lips moving, through the window."

The Captain laughed, as did Natty, and going to the windows he pulled down all the blinds.

"That better?"

"Right."

"Think the chap's a smart one, do you?" asked the Captain, hunching forward and playing with the salt-cellar.

"A little smarter than they usually run hereabouts. Oh, he's foxy, no doubt. He didn't like it at all, our coming. You could see that. How's the mare?"

"Just the same. Mad as a hatter. You'd think she was seeing a ghost night and day. Shaking like a leaf, and last night she kicked a hole through the stall. It woke me up. Made a noise like kingdom come."

"Then she's worse at night."

"Very much so."

"After bedding down?"

"That's it."

Natty stroked a finger down his nose. "A chap sees a lot going past farms and cottages as we do. And even when the eye doesn't pick it out, the mind's eye, which is the memory, does. Anything out of the ordinary, like a new door or thatch, new kind of rose, a change of crops, or a patch in the road—it sees that without hardly knowing it.

"Now, Captain, I've been here often and often. Nobody does any threshing around here?"

"Nobody. We raise hay."

"No straw crop?"

"Not in ten years."

"Nor anybody buy straw hereabouts?"

“I don’t, nor does anybody else.”

Natty smiled, then knocked out his pipe. He refilled it, with all eyes upon him.

“Then how did all that pile of old straw bedding come outside the stable? I saw it when I jumped down off the wardo and looked about the place.”

“I didn’t notice any,” said the Captain.

“I did,” Natty remarked, lighting his pipe and slowly shaking out the match. “Plenty. Long, shiny stalks. That means barley. I saw a lot of that near where the fair was.”

The Captain leveled a glance at him. “You may know something. But it sounds to me just like a riddle.”

“Then do this. I know you won’t mind. Send word to the stableman to make a hay bed for the mare tonight. What time does he bed down?”

“At nine.”

“Well, it’s only nine now.”

They both smoked in silence a while, looking at each other, then Natty asked questions.

“He’s devoted to the animal, I know. Took a fancy to her the very day he came. He has good recommendations, too. I got him to train her for the Sussex Hurdles. There can’t be any doping. It would be a give-away if he tried. I’m a pretty fair veterinary, myself.”

“I know that.”

The Captain rang the bell. When the maid appeared he gave instructions.

“Tell Hawkins to bed the mare with hay.”

She nodded and withdrew.

“I’ll turn in now,” said Natty. “And I’ll turn into the hay loft before Hawkins gets there. Good-night. I’ll see you in the morning.”

He was gone.

An hour later, Gammer and Jubal went upstairs. Gwilym sat talking with Captain Lewis until midnight, a talk on Moor House, its farming, and the people in the village. Once or twice his host excused himself to go to the window and peer from behind the blind, but it was obvious he could see nothing, for the night was dark and stormy, and not a gleam was visible at the

stable, where Natty was presumably asleep.

“It’s odd folk you’ve got in with,” said the Captain. “Wonderful lot, though. I envy you. You’ll get home all the wiser, if—” and here the Captain gave a wry smile—“if only for the thrashing. I don’t know what your grandfather will think of all this traipsing about.”

“I don’t think he’ll mind.”

“Indeed?” The Captain’s eyebrows went up.

“He’s on the drom himself.”

They both laughed. Then Gwilym blinked, and almost fell over with drowsiness. The Captain ushered him upstairs to the sleeping chamber.

“You won’t find any straw in that mattress, I hope. Good-night.”

There was a mountainous bed under a canopy, and Gwilym burrowed into it like a mole. He had opened the window in case something happened. He half expected to hear a piercing cry, then a thud of blows, or perhaps a pistol-shot. Holding his eyes open, he kept awake as long as he could. Then drowsiness clouded his thoughts, Twm-Twm took the place of the mare, and he mounted his back and was carried off into a dream and then into a long, blank sleep.

He awoke with a start. It was broad daylight. Sun poured in through the windows. Sixpence was licking his face. The door was open, the maid looked in at him, then entered with a tray.

“Is everybody else up?” he asked.

“Hours ago, sir,” she answered, putting his breakfast before him. She looked perturbed.

“Where are the others?”

“In the wheeled house. Mrs. Ringo and the younger Mr. Jubal, they slept outside all night. They went upstairs, but they came down almost at once. You don’t think they are afraid of ghosts?”

“No. They are afraid of the roof falling on their heads. At least Mrs. Ringo is. The one they call Gammer.”

“She looks like a witch.”

“She is really very kind. She can sing prettily.”

“If she were a hymn-singer, it’s a house of her own she’d have, and not go roaming about like that.”

Gwilym puzzled over that after the maid was gone, and wondered what hymn-singing had to do with keeping in one place a long time. He finished his tea and toast, then dressed and went downstairs. The house was empty. The Ringos and Captain Lewis were all on the wardo steps. Something had happened, no doubt, and they were discussing it.

“He must be miles away now,” said Captain Lewis. “He went in his own dog-cart, and not telling anyone but the maid he was going. Ten shillings’ wages are owing to him, too.”

“He did twenty pounds’ worth of mischief. You won’t be able to race Tonto for another month.”

“I know it. Now, look here, Natty,” said the Captain with some impatience, “what sort of game did he play on me?”

“Let’s go in and see Tonto,” said Natty.

The three men and Gwilym trailed into the stable. Five chunky horses were swishing their tails in a row of five stalls. At the far end was a stall padded with canvas, but which had been torn to shreds. The mare cowered, then set her ears back and reared as for a plunge through the wall. Natty went in and spoke gently. He ran a hand across her back, patted her, and lifted one foot after another.

“Sound as a bell,” he said, giving her a slap on the chest. “Eyes like diamonds. Hoofs hard enough to break stones.”

He led her out by the bridle, walked her back and forth in the yard a few minutes, and she became calm.

“Get up,” he said to Gwilym.

Gwilym leaped upon her back.

“Take her for a gallop in that pasture, do.” Natty threw down the gate bars, all except the lower one, which she vaulted, and getting into the field, she raced furiously, pounding with light step, snorting hard as if to get the stable air out of her lungs. Gwilym circled the field twice. It was exhilarating. He was accustomed to ride Twm-Twm bareback, but Tonto was so fleet that it was like riding the wind. Then he clattered back into the cobbled yard.

“The boy can ride,” said the Captain, with interest. “You’d think he was glued on. I think he’d make a grand jockey.”

“Rather,” Natty drawled, fishing for his pipe. “Runs in the blood.”

They all turned to look at Tonto, who was taking her fill of the unscented

breeze, moving about and then, espying a tuft of grass in a corner of the yard, grazing it. Not a tremor flickered over her glossy limbs.

“She seemed all right,” said Gwilym. “What ails her, Natty?”

“Nothing now. Come over here and I’ll show you.”

Natty led him through the stable and out the further door into the poultry yard. He pointed to a heap of litter, much lighter in shade than the surrounding trash.

“The bedding. That did it. It’s straw raked from the tigers’ wagon at the fair. And the scent of it drove her mad.”

Captain Lewis was finishing a talk with Jubal as they came out.

“I’d give the stall a coat of whitewash,” said Natty. “And change Tonto into another stall.”

“Can’t get another hostler inside of a month. Good hostlers are few and hard to find.”

“She needs plenty of exercise, too.”

“I know it. Take her along with you for a month. That’ll freshen her up, stretch her legs and give her plenty of air.”

“She’ll get air, all right,” said Natty with a grin.

“Jubal say’s there’ll be a bit of racing up there on the moor. At the Sirnihatch.”

“Plenty. A mile dash for all Rommany comers.”

Captain Lewis nodded. “Put the young ’un up, and you’ll get a prize. And you keep it. Is that a fair offer?”

“Couldn’t be fairer!”

They shook hands and closed the bargain. The Captain gave a shout towards the house and the two servants came out with a hamper.

“A few things you might like,” he said. “Bread, a joint or two, a cheese, and such-like trifles.”

“Very handsome of you, Captain. We’re obliged. All of us.”

Soon they rolled away in the sunshine, Tonto trotting behind on a leash. They retraced their road for two hours, the Lewis farm being in the hills and far off the highway. Gwilym sat on the box with Sixpence pressed against him.

“We could have gone straight ahead,” said Natty. “But as a rule you find only one happening on each road. That over, hunt another road.”

“But suppose you don’t want anything to happen?”

Natty drew gravely on his pipe.

“In that case, Young Master, a man had better stay home with the cat. Ask Gammer if he hadn’t. It’s she gave us orders to turn into another drom.”

He chuckled, leaned back comfortably in his seat, and flicked his whip over the stolid Percherons.

“What’ll happen next, I don’t know. I’d like, Young Master, to go into some new droms—over in Anglaterra. But the best happenings are those that happen to you where you are.”

The sunlight was so full that the wardo might have been a golden boat swimming through haze.

“Jubal, work the squiffer.”

The next moment the strains of the concertina whanged melodiously and the brothers lifted their voices in a Gipsy road song. Gwilym learned the chorus, and they yelled it with all the force of their lungs, because they had come to a village.

They pulled up in front of the “Royal George.” Natty cupped his mouth and gave so thunderous a bellow that the window of the inn must have rattled as to a hurricane. The landlord waddled out hurriedly with surprise on his plump face.

“This is an inn, eh?” inquired Natty. “Sure it is. ‘The—Royal—George,’ ” he murmured, looking up at the sign.

“It is,” said the landlord. “You’re not blind. And we’re not deaf, neither.”

“‘Old Ale and Well-Aired Beds,’ ” Natty read aloud, with his eyes still fixed on the sign.

“It’s a good job nobody’s in the beds,” said the aggrieved landlord. “They’d have been woke up.”

“More likely they’d have been awake all night, what with your beds as hard as iron. I like my bed comfy. That’s why I sleep out. Landlord, fetch me a sample of your best ale. And don’t bring it in an egg-cup, neither.”

The host looked at him resentfully a moment, then waddled in.

“They just don’t like Rommanies in this place,” Natty whispered to Gwilym.

“Last time we came here, they were very impolite. Treat them high-handed, and they’ll respect you. They’ll have to serve us, anyway. It’s breaking the law if they don’t.”

The landlord came out. The twitch of his smile betokened mischief. He held a large pot of ale, a copper tankard that held almost two quarts, and lifted it to the box.

Natty reached for it, blew off the foam, gave a wink, and swallowed the ale in one gulp. It was a feat unheard of at the inn. The landlord stared with incredulity.

“Not bad, for tuppenny ale,” grumbled Natty. “I’ll come in and have some.”

The Ringos and Gwilym got down and entered the inn, followed by the landlord who was still unable to believe his senses. In the taproom they had a luncheon of cold beef, tailor’s snack, which is a sandwich of buttered bread and oatcake, and a pot of tea. This was the finest inn in the place, and a number of the village gentry were at the tables, a squire, some merchants and the chemist, smoking and drinking their after-luncheon liqueurs. They turned a curious eye upon the newcomers, and especially upon Natty, a giant in corduroys, who strode to the fireplace, filled his long clay pipe and placed upon it, with his fingers, a glowing coal.

“It seems to me, sir, I’ve seen you before,” said the Squire. “Perhaps only yesterday.”

Natty, upright, with back against the fire and drawing on his pipe, lifted an eyebrow in surprise.

“Indeed, where?”

“In the boxing show at the fair. A rough place, too, full of bullies and the rowdy stripe. Quite disgraceful! I never saw such a scene in my life. The tent was full of the lowest characters, a lot of jail-birds.”

The Gipsy, poised and dignified, looked quizzically upon the pompous little Squire, who sat red-faced and arrogant at the table.

“Aye, to be sure! I thought I saw the gentleman milling about in that shindy. Very neat it was, the way he gave the policeman the slip.”

The Squire gave a start, opened his mouth to protest, but the taproom rang with laughter. He was none too well liked, and Natty, whose quiet manners had assured him sympathy from the start, had given him a facer.

The chemist guffawed, and rocked so helplessly on the bench, waving his

hands as if in feeble protest at a comedian who knew his power, that the others became convulsed. Rising to his full stature, which wasn't much, the Squire clapped on his hat and trod indignantly from the inn.

He stopped. Tonto caught his eye.

"That's Captain Lewis' horse!" he shouted into the inn. "What's she doing here?"

Natty was in the doorway, amongst the others summoned by the cry.

"I'm taking her in hand, Squire. At Captain Lewis' request. She's been acting badly and he gave me the job to teach her polite manners."

The Squire banged his hat on and marched off angrily.

"That's one beak I shouldn't like to meet again," said Natty, "that is, in a courtroom."

So the luncheon wound up as a merry party, and the landlord, who had been deafened at the Ringos' arrival, shook hands with them at parting and bade them the best of good fortune.

"And if you must stop, then stop at the further end of the parish lines, because the Squire's angry and he'll have the constable after you."

Just then, the chemist mustered over to the wardo. He had a message for Jubal, whom he had met somewhere before.

"Are you going up the mountain road?"

The answer was cautious: "Belike."

"Well, beyond the Swamp is the farm of Nant Isaf. The owner of it is troubled by rats. He came for some chemicals to rout them, and I told him, 'It's a rat-catcher you want, and if I see one in the village, I'll ask him to call.' He said, 'Aye,' so I have done so. But, mind you, he holds tight to his purse-strings."

"Mr. Chemist, thank you. And strings, come to think on it, are made to be untied."

Natty kicked off the brakes, and the wardo bowled on. White clouds, like heaps of sailcloth, unrolled over the blue sky, and the wind blew tonic and free.

"Rats can wait," said Jubal. "I want to go fishing."

"The Lees and the Smiths are camping hereabouts," Natty remarked. "I saw a patteran a mile back. We shan't be long now."

They had come down from the bleak moors, another turn and they were finding themselves in pastoral land, with clumps of green oak, emerald fields with hedges afire with hawthorn blossoms, and flocks of sheep that were fat and woolly. The brothers appeared to be singing. Gwilym learned that by opening and closing his mouth in the wind, as if he, too, were singing, a melodious noise filled his head. It was like an anthem, or an oratorio, with organ music; loud enough to stun the world, though nobody could hear it but himself. Both Jubal and Natty were making music for themselves this way, letting the wind play them a concert. One could be entranced thus, and hours would seem just like minutes.

“There it is,” said Natty, pointing with his whip.

A thread of smoke was winding about a copse near the river. Nothing else was visible.

“Aye, the Lees,” affirmed Jubal.

“That growth is willow slashings,” said Natty. “And so it must be the Lees, they being cane weavers.”

They turned into the meadow path. All the sunlight in the world was shimmering on the river; tall blossoms nodded in the breeze and knocked their heads against the wheel-hubs of the van. Sixpence, who foresaw rabbit hunts, yipped with expectancy. The Ringos whistled a long trill between their teeth. Gwilym pricked his ears at once. It was the signal of the family, the call he had heard every spring at Moor House.

“Trrr-lll-eee!”

That was no echo. It was an answering call from the willow slashings.

Jubal nodded his head. “Aye, that’s Mammet Lee.”

“There’ll be some fun!” laughed Natty. “Mammet’s a card, Young Master.”

“Wonder what hukkaben he’s up to now,” mused Jubal with a shrug of tolerant humor.

“Something no other man could think up!”

Even amongst the Rommany, Gwilym was beginning to learn, there were all sorts of conditions and stripes of men. They differed as did folk in towns, perhaps even more.

“Mammet Lee,” breathed Natty. “He’s the very Jackanapes, our Mahomet is.”

The camp was unlovely, Gwilym thought. Four or five shabby wardos, two

or three grimy tents, and a score of adults and children in flashy and yet dingy garb. The women were squatting about the fires, the men lying in the sunshine asleep, or else weaving cane and puffing at their clays. All heads turned as the golden wardo came into sight. There were shouts of welcome.

“There’s our mischief now,” shouted Jubal. “Hey, Rom!”

Mammet came striding up. Tall, thin as a switch, with wrecked corduroys, a rakish velours hat, and a droll dark face. When he saw Tonto, he winked at Natty like a fellow conspirator.

“Good haul, Natty. Better dye him white, or it’ll be a year behind bars for you.”

“No, we’ve fetched along a special jockey for him. Mammet, shake hands with Gwilym Anwyl. He’s going to ride him at the Sirnihatch.” Natty dropped his voice. Gwilym could hear only a whispered reference to Moor House.

“Sir,” said Mammet, bowing with genuine courtesy, “you’re as welcome as the stars.” He assisted Gwilym to the ground.

“And whatever you know about horses,” said Natty, “you teach him.”

“There’s no Lee, nor a Ringo, can teach an Anwyl much,” said Mammet with a grin as he led Tonto away.

Natty rigged up a tent. It was of green canvas, with golden bands, and it had a partition. The other Gipsies came round, and were both cordial and respectful. The Ringos stood high in this world of poor wanderers. And poor enough most of them looked. Their tents were of sewed gunny-bags; the older folk wore cast-off clothes, like ragpickers. But all looked cheerful. Gwilym went down to the river with a line and hook. He fished for hours, until the sun dropped behind the willows and he caught a small carp.

Mammet attached himself to the Ringos and Gwilym found himself drawn under his tutelage.

“You’d better get up,” was the advice that woke him the next morning, that and a shake. He crawled out from under the wardo, and Mammet put a curry-comb into his hand.

“Curry him plenty. Before the sun gets hot.”

Gwilym set to work at once on Tonto. “Bear down a little harder,” said Mammet. “Slow and curving, three strokes while you count ten. That’ll make the nag shine.”

He toiled hard, hissing like a real stableman, while Mammet nodded like a

piano-teacher counting time for a new pupil. Not until he had curried for an hour did Mammet release him for breakfast. Tonto was a jewel, a prodigy, and the center of the camp. Gammer began to sew on a special blanket for him. Natty sewed knee-cap bandages. Jubal set up a forge and anvil, and hammered out a set of shoes. They were beautiful and fragile-seeming, weighing two ounces each, pointed and long. Slouchy, unkempt Jubal was an artist. The shoes were forged with love and cunning. Their airy curves reminded Gwilym of a segment of a spider's web. He was proud to work the bellows and hold the long-handled punch for Jubal to strike and make the nail-holes. More than once he had helped Taid shoe Twm-Twm, and even pared the hoofs, but he had never seen such adroitness as this.

"Now, to temper 'em," said Jubal, as if to himself.

"I didn't know shoes were ever tempered—like knives, or chisels."

"Because you didn't ever see a horse like Tonto afore," said Mammet chidingly.

Jubal dropped a cherry-red shoe into the water keg. It hissed. He flicked it out, bent over and rubbed the metal with a strip of emery cloth, watched the sliding of the colors, then dashed it into clear water.

"Good steel," he grunted. "Good enough for watch springs."

"Wunnderful," said Mammet to Gwilym. "That's as pretty tinkering as you'll ever see in your born days."

Natty, leaning against a van-wheel, hands in pockets, hummed a tune:

Jubal polished the shoes with sandpaper, strung them on a wire and tossed them to Mammet, who gazed upon them with ecstasy. They had the shine and ring of silver.

"All right?"

"Right's the word, Jubal!"

"Now for the salute to good luck."

Jubal heated a flat bar, spat on the anvil, brought down the glowing iron and instantly hit it with a hammer. The explosion deafened all hands.

"That's a good start," affirmed Mammet.

He fetched Tonto over, pried off the old shoes, nailed on, filed, and trimmed the new ones.

"Looks like they were melted on her," said Natty. "Tomorrow, after she's

got used to them, we'll try her in a canter."

Gwilym returned to his fishing while the elders sat about the fire talking. They were still there when he returned at dusk with three more carp which he gave to a family in the poorest tent. Mammet was cooking a hedgehog. He had wrapped it in clay and was poking it about in the embers where it glowed like a shard of pottery. He raked it out, broke it open, and the spines came out with the clay, leaving the meat clear. A savory dish it was, and the Ringos, Mammet, and Gwilym had a banquet. Gammer had gone to stay with a family of Lees, taking the hamper with her, so the camp dined well that night.

The Lees had been here a fortnight, making baskets. This was the season for the weaving craft; the slashings were green and full of sap.

"I could stay here forever," sighed Mammet. "For another week, anyway. I like to hear the river babble, and watch the carp tipping up their little noses. There was moonshine last night. That's when the eels come out. They swim around with their heads out of the water, bent like walking-sticks.

"When we turned into the meadow we passed that farm yonder. Did you see all the bitty hens in the field? Well, as soon as we got here I made a basket at once. Aye, I was the first to make a basket this spring."

Natty looked at him inquiringly. "What for?"

"Where there's hens there's eggs."

"I didn't know you could weave. I thought your lay was china-mending."

"Right. But we've got a weakness for eggs, too. So I made a basket.

"I never saw so many hens in my life as that farm had. The yard was covered so thick with them that you couldn't put your shoe down without stepping on three or four. But would the farmer sell me any eggs?

" 'Get away with you, now,' he said. 'Or I'll set the mastiff on you. I want no Gipsies here.' "

"I said I meant no harm to anybody. I just wanted to buy eggs. But he set the mastiff on me, he did. I knocked the dog away with my stick and that made the farmer angrier than ever.

" 'Not an egg will you get!' he shouted. 'Only dog-bites.' "

Jubal looked at Mammet sadly.

"That was an uncivil way to talk to a poor man that just wanted to buy an egg."

“So I thought. ‘For that, Farmer,’ I told him, ‘your hens will be bewitched. The devil will get in them.’

“That night and every night for a week after, I crawled into the henhouse and brought two eggs here. I poked a hole in the big end and dropped in a button, a collar-stud, a nail or a shoe-lace. Once I put in a four-leaved clover, which means bad luck, and a spent bullet, which means worse. Then I put the eggs back in the nest.”

“I should think the hole would show,” said Natty.

“Not if you use china cement.

“Then, after the week was over I went up again. The farmer was in the kitchen, sitting by the fireside, because it was raining, and he looked black with anger and half gone in the wits. The scullery maid had her face tied up for a broken tooth.

“ ‘Can I buy a dozen eggs?’ I asked him.

“ ‘I’ll sell eggs to the devil first!’ he shouted. He was still uncivil, but shaking all over this time.

“ ‘Take that spell off!’ he yelled when I turned to go.

“ ‘There’ll be a price for that job,’ I said. ‘And a very hard job it is, lifting spells.’

“Well, I took the spell off, and he paid the price like a proper gentleman. Five dozen eggs and ten of the fattest hens. I felt their bones to see they were tender and plump.”

Natty handed round his tobacco pouch and more stories were told by one or the other. Some were funny, some were sad. To Gwilym it seemed there was an unending war between the Rommany chals and the people that lived under roofs, and luck in the struggle was fickle. The talk was in Rommany, and tiring of listening, he got up and strolled to the village. He found a stationer’s shop open, and there he wrote a letter to Myfi, relating some of his adventures and telling her he hoped to be back in five days or so, and if he didn’t, that there was no cause for worry. Also he would bring back fairings for her and Shan. It would be just as well to propitiate Shan, who must now be in a towering fury.

Next morning he was roused still earlier. Mammet had his trap out with a piebald in the shafts. The light was unearthly. Gwilym crawled out, blinked, combed the hair out of his eyes, and swallowed the cup of hot tea Mammet put into his hands.

“Early try-out?” he asked.

“Not this morning. We’re going after them rats.”

Gwilym, yawning, only half comprehended, but climbed after Mammet into the trap and the piebald tore ahead, galloping through bluish haze towards the sulphur-pink slit that was sunrise. The air was dank; their faces were wet; they breathed the early odors of peat smoke and moist blackberry bushes. Gwilym’s mackintosh was buttoned to the throat; Mammet had on a gorgeous muffler and a yellow waistcoat, and his teeth gritted a new clay. His arms were out, rigid, for the piebald was taut on the reins.

“Rats! Aha—you watch me get ’em! It’s sport worth going a long way for.”

“Have you got the terrier?”

“Lor’, no! There’s a dodge worth a hundred terriers.” His eyes were goblinesque, and a sound of chuckling was in his swathed throat.

The piebald had winged hoofs and the heart of a lion. It raced for a league. The trap-wheels spun like squirrel cages. Dawn gave way to brassy sunlight, the roads dried, grew steeper, and mounted into rocky country. They came to a farm with a tall, iron gate. Gwilym opened it. They moved slowly among larches and yews, on a path of raked gravel, and came in sight of a stucco house; on its terrace were banks of dahlias and monkey-puzzle trees.

“Nant Isaf—Lower Glen, that’s it,” said Mammet. “Reg’lar palace. We’ll tie up right here.” He laid a finger against his nose and tipped Gwilym a wink. “You watch the front. If anybody shows up, you patter and chivvy ’em, so they won’t head for the stables.”

“Why?”

“ ’Cos I’m goin’ to work a hukkaben. An’ we don’t want to let the Gorgios in on all the tricks of our lay.”

“What shall I say if they ask what I’m doing?”

“Tell ’em you’re a ’prentice and got to watch my horse.”

Hat in hand, Mammet prowled round to the back. He was learned in the ways of gentry’s houses, and knew where to ambush the housekeeper. Gwilym loitered on the terrace, admiring the trees, whose branches seemed made of triangles of iron strung on a rod. He heard a dull, knocking sound. On the lawn a bearded gentleman in a blazer was driving a wooden ball through hoops. That was probably croquet. At the far end of the lawn was a summer-house; hexagonal, with a spire and colored glass windows. Gwilym thought this

exactly the right kind of house to build if one had the good fortune to be cast away upon a desert island, like Robinson Crusoe.

“Hullo! How about a game?”

He started. There was no help for it. He went down and received a mallet. At a nod from the man, he thwacked the ball, a little too hard.

“Rather bad. Go like this.”

The man was a dead hand at the game. However hard or lightly he struck the ball, it dribbled at the same pace and always through a hoop. He played with absorption, as if nothing else mattered.

“Who came with you?” he murmured, as if asking himself the question, and with his eye still on the ball.

“Mammet.”

The ball clacked off at a tangent, a bad shot.

“Mahomet, eh? Good Lord! Where’d he come from? Mecca?”

“From the drom, sir. The road, that is. He belongs to the Lees.”

“What’s he doing here?”

“Gone to catch the rats.”

“Well, then, he’s the wrong Arab. The chemist said the proper man was Jubal Ringo.”

“Mr. Ringo’s busy, so he sent along Mammet.”

“My name’s Owen, I live here,” said the man, sticking the mallet into the turf and sitting on the hammer end. “What are you doing, gadding about with that jolly crew?”

Sharp as gimlets were the eyes staring above that heavy beard, and there was no evading them.

“It’s spring, and a good time to be moving around. And they’re friends of ours, the Ringos. You see, I like journeying.”

“I see. Twenty years ago I left here, went to a dozen lands and to many great cities,” the man said, talking in Welsh.

“Everywhere there was earth, or pavements, buildings and people. After a while there was too much sameness. So I came back. And I’m no wiser than before.”

“Were you wise before you left?” asked Gwilym, with profound respect.

Mr. Owen laughed somberly in his beard.

“Perhaps not. Else I should have returned earlier.” He fished for a cigar in his blazer pocket, bit and lighted it. “Again, I would have been a fool if I hadn’t left.”

Throwing down the mallet, he motioned with his cigar toward the house and they left for it, talking. Gwilym had to tell him everything that had happened since he left home. They entered the large, raftered kitchen. Mr. Owen lifted his massive voice and bellowed, “Llaith enwyn, bara cerch!”

A woman servant brought in buttermilk and oatcake. Gwilym felt an uprush of homesickness. He would even have been glad to see the woman turn into Shan Gof.

“Tell me all about that side-show fight again,” said the host, leaning back in his chair, with his feet on the hob.

Gwilym repeated the story.

“Well,” said Mr. Owen, “I know I never had such fun as that on my travels. Hullo, here comes Mahomet! Salaam Aleikum!”

Mammet hovered politely in the doorway, tugging his lock. At a sign, he took a chair, and the woman fetched him also a mug of buttermilk. All drank deeply.

“Well,” said Mr. Owen, “rats gone?”

“All done for. Sixty of ’em. All very big fellows.”

“Kill them?”

“They’re gone.”

“What’s the fee?”

“Fifteen shillings. Your honor will save that much in corn before the week is out.”

“Fifteen shillings! For only an hour’s work!”

“It took me fifteen years to learn how to do that job in one hour—instead of a month,” said Mammet quietly.

Grumbling in his beard, the host drew out a purse, untied the strings with great deliberation, counted out some silver and copper, spread the coins on the table and counted them again.

“That’s fourteen and sixpence,” said Mammet. “We’re a tanner short.”

The host reluctantly pushed over another sixpence.

“Thankee kindly,” said Mammet, sweeping the money into his pocket.

“Keturah. Go and see what kind of a job’s been done in the stable.”

“And in the granary,” Mammet added.

The woman disappeared. In ten minutes she returned wide-eyed.

“Not one left,” she marveled. “Never before, not since my grandmother’s time, has Nant Isaf been clean-free of rats.”

“Where are they now?”

“Killed. All in a heap.”

Mr. Owen looked at Mammet. “Why didn’t you say you’d killed them?”

“Not before I got paid, your honor.”

A smile lurked at his mouth. “There’s some country gentlemen would let a poor man whistle for his money after he’d killed all the rats. I’d just as soon them feel I could whistle the rats back if I didn’t get the silver.”

All three laughed. Mr. Owen the least heartily of all.

“How’d you do it?” he asked.

Mammet stroked his chin. “A very old trick, your honor. An old Rommany trick. I don’t know whether it’s giving away a secret or not.”

“I’m sure it is. Tell me.”

“Well, then, you’ve heard of Gipsy Hamling?”

“Hamling?” The bearded man knotted his brow. “Hamling?”

“He was famous for tootling on a pipe.”

“Any relation of the Pied Piper of Hamelin?”

“Either the same,” said Mammet gravely, “or a cousin. Let’s say he was the same. But a real Gipsy he was, and full of jolly hukkabens. He drawled all the rats clean out of the village of Hamling. But that tootling on the pipe was just to hoodwink the Mayor and the constables. Being a Gipsy he didn’t get along well with the constables.

“What he did was to rub smoked herrings and caraway oil on his boot-heels, and the rats all came flocking and sniffing after him. If he had told the officers

the job was as easy as that—not music magic—just herrings and tuppence worth out of the chemist’s shop, well, your honor, they’d have lodged him in stir for a month.”

“That casts new light on history,” said the host. “I knew there was a scientific explanation, if one could only dig it out. Have a cigar?”

“Thanks, we will.”

Mr. Owen left, came back with a pair of cigars, gave one to each, and spread a sheet of paper on the table.

“I’ll expect you again before long. To clear out the premises of some of my neighbors. So will you please write your name?”

Mammet did so.

“And now, the name of your young friend here. He will write it himself.”

Gwilym also signed. They shook hands with their host, and left.

When they were on the turnpike again, Mammet chuckled.

“Don’t break that cigar. Better give it to me.”

He received it from Gwilym and buttoned his coat tenderly over it, then laughed.

“Aye, that was fun. Fifteen shillings’ worth, too.”

“He didn’t take it amiss that you didn’t quite trust him.”

“Oh, no, why should he? He’s a gentleman. He didn’t trust me, neither, not on two counts. The rats and you.”

“Me?”

“He’s a foxy one. Didn’t he make us sign the paper? Tried to look simple, too, hidden behind those whiskers. As if I didn’t know he was the chief constable of the county. And if there was a boy lost, he’d know, with that paper, where to nab us and get the reward.”

The turnpike rang with laughter. Mammet was still in excellent humor when they reached the encampment in the willows. Natty and Jubal were pleased with the details of the expedition, a profitable one, with booty of sport, shillings, and cigars.

“How many rats were they, Mammet?” asked Natty.

“Oh, about a dozen. They looked more, all heaped up like that.”

Mammet rolled upon the grass, shouting with mirth.

It had been a good day, and Gwilym thought it no end of fun, and he was gratified that he had been taken into the secret of the art of rat-catching. Mammet rubbed his hands and told the story over again, giving perhaps rather more excitement than was necessary to the rôle Gwilym had played in the adventure.

“I always said,” Natty remarked, “that if a boy has to learn a trade, he must find him a good master. And when it comes to mullering the rattas, who can touch Mammet?”

Gwilym had his qualms, though, when he thought of his name being down on paper and in the hands of the police. To those on the drom he knew it was like the sword of Damocles, and thenceforth every constable had to be watched out for.

After all this, the camp routine was dull. He joined some of the elders who had gone to fish at the bank with hook and worm. While the oldsters dabbled their lines and yanked out eels, he and another lad had to take turns as sentries, with eyes open for the game warden. Even that was rather fun; they all remained late and strolled back in darkness to the tents. The scene was ghostly. About the campfire were the women, sitting in a ring; back of them the men lounged, with glowing pipes, against trees and van-wheels.

Jubal kept throwing pine-knots upon the fire; the flames shot up with a tearing sound, illuminating the dark visages of the women, their mouths open in song.

Gammer led the chanting recital, keening in Rommany. It was a song of a lonely Gipsy woman who sat hungry under a tree and implored a dove to bring her a crumb of bread, but it flew on unheeding; then she begged an eagle to fetch her a cup of brandy, but this bird, too, was unmindful. Of the tree she asked nothing, but it was touched at her plight, and with the help of the wind it poured into her lap a sackful of ripe nuts.

Then thirty voices broke into loud praise of the tree, their owners smiting their hands and swaying back and forth. The men joined in; the firelight gleaming in their dark eyes and on the silver of their pipes which they waved in time to the rise and fall of the melody. Owls hooted in the copse. Large black moths detached themselves from the night to hover in thrall of the flames.

It was like coming upon the secret worship of a strayed band of pilgrims. And when silence came, Gwilym felt awed at what he had seen and heard. He

had a feeling of kinship with these dark wanderers; yet he was aware of being something of an interloper who had spied on a mysterious ritual. He thought with a pang of Moor House and the beloved and familiar heath. He whistled softly to himself, absently, repeating a bar over and again.

Twigs crackled under a slow tread, and as he turned he saw that Natty was watching him.

“You’ve heard it often enough to know it by heart?”

It was only then he knew he had been whistling the call he had heard over the hedge, on the advent of the Whistlers’ Van.

“It would be strange if I didn’t, by this time.”

“It’s a message from Egypt. Only the deep Rommanies whistle it.”

Natty waved to the many Lees gathered about the fire.

“The Ringos were as many, once. Forty wardos, they had, and a hundred horses to pull them. And all for lack of wise head-men, they are scattered and few.”

“Why aren’t you their head, or even the King of all the tribes?”

“Not I,” muttered Natty. “I’m not of the blood line, and when leaves are scattered, I’m poor at raking them together. That takes the knack.”

He turned away softly, as the voices rose again. Gwilym, sleepy, crawled to his blanket under the wardo, listened to the ebb and flow of the tree song, the splash of a salmon leaping in the river, and fell dreaming of horse races and kings and crowns.

The Arabian Mare

THE meadow exhaled mist at the sun. Because of the dampness the herbage was like wet green paint. It was Sunday, but the Lees recked little of that, and they loafed before the tents and wardos, twisting and weaving their clutches of osier, or walked up and down grazing their horses. The church bells in the village were banging their brazen sides; the sound came flat and discordant to the folk in the copse. Gwilym felt glad he was not a townsman who had to march stiffly, with grave face, collar and black suit, to hear a sermon. There were townsmen, also, of his own way of thinking, for a sprinkling of them were on the river banks, casting into the water, or else, angle-rod held high, wading in rubber boots up to their hips, among the cattle who stood as motionless as stumps.

Gwilym saddled Tonto and sprang astride.

“Closer,” said Mammet. “That’s the way. Heels to your horse’s ribs, and your elbows to your own. Style’s the word.”

“I don’t like the saddle.”

“Then it’s just right, isn’t it, Natty?”

“Aye. Style’s the word.”

“But I’m not comfortable,” Gwilym protested.

“If you were, it would be wrong.”

The saddle wasn’t much larger than a neckerchief; the stirrups had been raised so that Gwilym’s knees were on a level with his chin. He was getting used to it, though, for this was the second day of training.

“Ready!”

The pistol rang out with hardly any smoke, because of the mist. At the flash

from the muzzle, Gwilym crouched, Tonto lunged forth her head, spurned the planet with her hoofs and was lost in the vapor.

“Went like a trout,” said Natty.

In hardly any time the earth quivered behind them. Tonto bolted past into the vapor, her new shoes flashing, Gwilym bowed over her mane.

“Lummy, she has wind, though!”

They watched for half an hour, and when the circle had been run fifty times, Mammet gave a sharp whistle. Gwilym pulled up, then leaped to the ground.

“Take her for a rub,” said Mammet. “That’s enough for today.”

Turning to Natty, he asked, “You didn’t think of buying her?”

“Worth a thousand guineas, if a penny. But I’ve seen better at the price. And I’ll see more.”

“She’ll do, though, for the races.”

“Oh, aye, she’ll do well enough.”

“A streak of luck to have her with the kid—and both there at the Sirnihatch. It’ll be a facer to old King Pendy.”

“The kid takes to it like a duck to water. They all do at that age.”

The two moved thoughtfully towards the copse.

“Was he kept out of it all the while?”

“Aye,” said Natty. “It wouldn’t matter if he were a Lee, there’s plenty of ’em.” He laughed. “But the Ringos are few. Thomas Ringo who turned on his race and name when he married that Miss Anwyl; us three, and about seven more in Anglaterra, on the Sussex Downs.”

“Few enough.”

“All born horsemen, too. Hate to see the breed die out. And the kid’s the youngest—unless you count the girl.”

“Bound to put the brand on him, aren’t you?”

“Aye.”

Mammet grinned puckishly, then drew a finger down his nose.

“Sly does it.”

“It’s working, Mammet.”

“We need a good jockey. To head off King Pendy who’s all for us turning chauffeurs and hauling the horses off for chicken-meat.”

Gwilym dried Tonto with a wisp of straw, then curried her until his arm was lame. Jubal carried tea and muffins out to him under the tree, and talked with him on riding while he ate breakfast.

“Natty thinks the race is all sewed up. We’ll win just as sure as God made hedgehogs. And it’ll be a great day at the Sirnihatch for the Rommanies that think Gryemengros are better men than greasy lorry drivers.”

“They are, aren’t they?”

“Of course—but those on King Pendy’s side think not. We’ll soon be there. Early in the morning we set out.”

“I like it here, though.”

The mist was still a translucent blanket over the copse. Through it the river seemed of thin milk, the leaping salmon made widening rings of mother-of-pearl.

“I wouldn’t mind staying here a long while, Jubal.”

“Oh, we all like it. We’re all fine gentlemen to the Lees. They do for us like valets. Fetch peat and water, and all that.”

Jubal stretched on the grass, pulled his hat over his face, and fell asleep. Gwilym had done his work for the day. He skimmed flat stones over the river. Then he meandered about the tents, looking at the weavers making baskets, whittling skewers, and caning chairs.

Best of all, he loved to watch Gaffer Lee, Mammet’s father. Gaffer was eighty-two, as black as a Moor, with an enormous hat that sank to his ears, and still had a spry foot to turn his grinding-wheel. Its hiss, as he ground scissors and knives, with a comet-tail of sparks, was audible all over the camp.

“Morning, sir,” he said respectfully, touching his hat to Gwilym.

“Good morning, Mr. Lee.”

Gaffer picked up a knife and studied the edge. Then he studied another, going through a pile of knives. He oiled his wheel, adjusted his hat, took up a knife, coughed, then watched Gwilym with the corner of his eye. He was suspicious of strangers. They had a way of prying out the secret of his craft, the putting of a fine edge on tools, and doing worthy men out of jobs.

“You’re a werry long way from your horse, sir.”

That puzzled Gwilym at first. Later it amused him.

“Am I?”

“Fact. And if you don’t watch him, he’ll be stole away.”

And when Gwilym went on, the grinding hiss of the wheel started up again.

By midafternoon almost everybody was asleep, even Natty, and the wheel was silent. Still there was fog, and a thin guttering drizzle as drops formed in the warmth. Gwilym lolled about a while, then saddled Tonto and galloped across the meadow for the village. It was only at night that the camp was roused to life.

Spacious elms, black with crows, guarded the entrance to the village. People in black, with hymn-books and gloves, were going to chapel. A few looked at him curiously, most of them disapprovingly. The shops were barred. The silence was oppressive, broken only by the clack of Tonto’s hoofs, and that day the noise was unseemly. The only shop window not shuttered was the stationer’s, and Gwilym got down to flatten his nose against the pane and looked at the tops, the glass jars of bulls’-eyes and licorice sticks, the piles of fly-specked comic papers. He still had a couple of shillings left, but the door was locked.

A sense of desolation overpowered him. He felt with grief that he no longer belonged to respectable society, and that the first constable to come along would lock him up. Brick and stone buildings, harsh and forbidding; cottages stuffy with their fires and carpets; shops closed tighter than prisons—these were about him. How much more cheerful, open and kinder, was the camp. No wonder the Gipsies kept to the fields. He understood why they shunned the towns, and distrusted townsfolk, who were of so foreign a turn of mind.

He rode homeward down a lane. Near a tall privet hedge he heard the clinking of a ball and the sound of voices. He raised himself in the stirrups and looked over. Two boys, younger than himself, were playing cricket and laughing. He watched them for several minutes. It was a game he liked, he was proficient at it, and played often with his classmates in Elias Schoolmaster’s yard.

“I say, look—will you?”

The lad at the wicket was staring up at him. Then the bowler glanced up, and with accord they flung down bat and ball and stalked, hands in pockets, half defiant, half fearful, to the house, and a butler came out, then the three of them stared at Gwilym.

“Get along now, my good fellow,” shouted the butler. “We can’t have loafing around here.”

They probably took him for a prowler, or a thief. Gwilym was conscious that he hadn’t scrubbed himself very thoroughly for some days. The best he had done, for lack of soap, was a lick and a promise with a wet cloth at the river. He rode on for the camp.

The first thing he did when he got back was to ransack the wardo for a cake of soap. He found one, a black square of harness soap; but it would have to do. The Ringos and the rest of the camp were still asleep. Sixpence followed him to the river, and there Gwilym washed himself with vigor, swam about for half an hour, from one “splash ring” to another, kicked out from the opposite bank a few times, then got out, feeling extraordinarily different.

He was toweling himself with his shirt, for he had a fresh one to put on, when Jubal appeared at the bank.

“The year’s early, Young Master,” he said with reproof. “D’ye want to catch cold?”

“One must take a bath sometime.”

“Goin’ to race Tonto, aren’t-cher?”

“Yes.”

“Then don’t act so stubborn. Me doin’ my best for you, and yet you jump in rivers.”

“It’s all right, I’m out now.”

“Right glad you ought to be I ain’t Natty nor Mammet Lee. They’d be rampin’ furious!”

Jubal’s eyes gleamed with mischief and approval, for here was a deed admirably contrary to discipline.

“Where are they at now?” asked Gwilym.

“Back of the wardo, rakkerin’ something special and private. They’ve got it all cut out for you.”

“About the race?”

“Belike, and other things.”

It was a long conversation for Jubal. He whistled mysteriously to himself, rescued a broken cigar from the inside of his cap, repaired it with his tongue, and ambled on.

They had a world of power between them, Natty and the spokesman of the Lees, Mammet. They were regarded with the respect due princes or statesmen, and, as they sat before their handful of separate fire, talking with each other in deep Rommany, mixed with the argot of tinkers, Jubal lolled some distance away, leaning against a tree: a sentinel always ready with a smile or a crook of a thumb to detain anyone so forgetful or incautious as to come within hearing distance of the leaders in conference.

Gwilym sat on the wardo steps. It was late evening; the fog had thickened. He had wrapped himself in a blanket, for the wind was chill and disagreeable and the dew was heavy. He thought what a plight the poor folk would be in if it rained; the roofs of burlap would be wretched shelter. A child somewhere in the vans was crying; an accordion wheezed above the thrumming of the foliage. There was an intermittent splash at the river, where the salmon were leaping. He had come from a walk to the sedgy bank, and found the aspect eerie, for the eels were swimming about, their heads above water, reminding him of the handles of walking-sticks.

A homesickness came over him again, a yearning for the warm chimney-corner of Moor House, with its settle, the crackle of peat flames and a feeling of settledness and security. What ever could he do on the road? What craft to ply? Would he ever grow up to be a Gryemengro, a horse-master, like Natty or Mammet? Or, for lack of a gift for horses, would he have to follow the humble trade of tinker or umbrella-mender?

“Ah—ee!”

The cry startled him. It was not exactly a cry, but an exclamation of inquiry or surprise, and it came from inside the wardo. Gammer began to putter back and forth. Sixpence barked, as he always did when fearful. Gammer threw open the upper half of the door and looked out.

“Dick adoi! Look over there!”

Gwilym jumped to his feet and stared into the darkness.

“There’s nothing there, Gammer. It’s only Tonto!”

She gabbled to herself, half angrily, and Jubal hurried up. They talked a while.

“She’s safe, Gammer. We’ve got our eye on her.”

After she had closed the door again, Jubal turned to him.

“She’s dicked something in the air,” he muttered. “Dunno what. Says somebody’s on the way here and thinking of Tonto. Must be a constable or a

smart cove.”

Jubal raked under the wardo with his foot and caught up his blanket.

“I’m going to sleep over by yonder tree, where Tonto is. Something’s up. Good-night.”

It was all inscrutable, a witch’s business. A shudder went down Gwilym’s spine. For an hour as he lay drowsily under the wardo, curled up with his head on a grain sack, he could hear the tread of the uneasy Gammer and the whimpering of the dog. He dreamed she had turned into a witch and Sixpence into a black cat, and that constables were rushing in to put himself and all the Ringos into jail for pilfering a horse. A sad pickle it was, for all of them, and the end of it would be either the gallows or a long voyage on a prison transport, with exile as ultimate fate. Not even the cleverness of Natty Ringo and Mammet Lee could prevail against the word of law and society.

Even Gwilym’s wakening was somber, so vivid had been the dream. He woke with a heavy heart, and far later than his wont. The first sound he heard was laughter. That was reassuring. Jubal and Natty were laughing, and a third voice joined them; a strange voice to him, at first, then he recognized the tones of Captain Lewis.

He crawled out. All were in the wardo, having a mug of hot grog and a bite, for it was almost ten o’clock.

“She said it had somewhat to do with Tonto, didn’t she, eh?” Jubal grinned at Gwilym, then at the Captain. “Right?”

“Right,” said Gwilym. “What happened?”

“Oh, the Captain here, he got a bit lonely for his darling, so he tracked our patteran.”

“Wants to know how a pony should be brought up,” said Natty.

He flicked a thumb in the direction of the trees, and they all went out. For a while they sat wordless under the foliage. The Captain, who had been looking at Natty several times, as if on the point of imparting tidings of great moment, hesitated again, then came out with, “The Sirnihatch, when is it?”

“Inside of a week. They’ll be mustering the first few days.”

“Good. Then perhaps you can come up-country a space?”

“Gammer’s got to be at the Sirnihatch among the first. She won’t like to miss anything.”

The Captain handed him an object the size of a postcard, and Natty

scrutinized it. Gwilym saw it was a photograph of the kind made at fairs, and it depicted a snow-white horse with flowing mane. His friend's eyes glowed and he sighed as he gave it back.

"What would you say of it?" asked the other.

"An Arab. The like's not in all Wales nor in Anglaterra, neither. If I wasn't a Rommany, I'd be a Gipsy and see a horse like that once a year."

"Well, she's up-country. That's Ayeesha."

"Ayeesha!" Natty stared. "The mare that won the Sussex Cup?"

"The same. I'll take you to see her."

"I'll come. Jubal will go on ahead with the wardo and Gammer."

The Captain's gravity deepened, he plucked a handful of grass and let it trickle through his fingers.

"A man with a horse like that can't ask for anything more in this world," said Natty. "Why should he want to sell her?"

"Take her, and you'll rue it," said the Captain. "Tommy Spence brought sorrow to himself when he brought that horse from Arabia. He won the Cup, yes, but things went bad after that."

Gwilym listened. Ayeesha was not a racer, he learned, but a show and trotting horse of wondrous beauty and breeding. Spence was a Sussex farmer who bred horses, and who traveled far to find animals of a new or unusual strain. Then disaster befell him, he lost his health, shortly after he came to Wales, to the farm adjoining Captain Lewis', in fact. He was now at his extremity, and for that reason the Captain wished Natty to come to the farm and see what should be done about the horse.

There was no doubt in Gwilym's mind that the Captain linked together Spence's illness and the possession of the horse, though he hinted at this only vaguely.

"How ever did he come by Ayeesha?" asked Natty.

"I'll tell you all I know. Some of it he told me and the rest I pieced together."

Spence cared little about trading in horses. If he had one that was particularly fine, he kept it almost as one of the family. Hearing of a breed of horses in upper Arabia that were handsome and of extraordinary speed, he set out for Syria, joined a motor-caravan at a port on the Red Sea and went into the desert. Everywhere he went, he inquired concerning those animals. At

Medina he fell in with a dealer who told him what scant knowledge he had of the desert breeds, and advised him to keep going further south into the uncharted wilderness and to ask for a tribe called el-Sabigat.

Beyond that he got small help, but kept up his search with a train of five camels and a dozen native attendants. The guides were untrustworthy. Some deliberately pointed the wrong way, others, after taking him a distance, said such horses existed only in dreams. Word of him got about. Often a group of riders would appear on the horizon, watch his movements, then gallop off as if to warn their countrymen. More than once he was shot at, and only a fusillade from his attendants drove them off.

Great suspicion was afoot, it was generally thought he was an agent of a Christian nation and come to spy out the land and to prepare the way for a levying of new taxes, if not for a war. His inquiries of a horse-raising tribe was taken as a mere blind. But at the end of two months he came across a group of Solubbies, or wandering tinkers, perhaps of a Gipsy strain. Being not warriors, they were hospitable. For a sackful of flour they gave Spence all the information he wanted. The horse folk were to be found a league to the west. They were nomads who traded in camels but who took their horses about with them, and their base was a small oasis named Sabigat, whence their name.

He found them after two weeks more of search, far up in the desert of the Nejd, a country of black sand and rock, baking under the fierce sun, and with not a blade of grass anywhere to be seen. They were poor, but not one of the ten horses would they sell.

Spence became infatuated with a beautiful, snow-white mare, with a silky muzzle, tiny feet like a lady, and a tail that swept to the ground. He offered the old Sheik a thousand pounds, then half as much again, but the offer was rejected. It was merely that they did not care to part with any of their horses, and not that they were wishful for a higher price. Spence had never seen such poverty, no Gipsy tribe that he had ever seen lived so sparingly. Their fare was dried milk, in lumps resembling chalk, which they hammered into powder, mixed with water, when they could find it, and then drank. Save when they could find a tract of nettles growing out of the basalt floor of the desert, or shoot a dove.

“It’s a poor land indeed that has no hedgehog in it,” said Jubal, who was lying on the grass with his hat over his face.

“How did he wangle the horse from them?” asked Natty.

“Spence didn’t say. That is a point he was silent on. No horse had ever been given to a stranger, least of all a foreigner, by the el-Sabigat folk. He joined

with them, living in their tents, more than once getting into a fight with robbers and standing watch at night with a rifle.

“Spence was patient. He dressed in native garb, learned to speak the tongue of the Bedouins, and trained himself to endure privation, which meant going without food and water three days on end. Tanned to the hue of leather, bearded, and to all outward sign, save the blue eyes, he was an Arab. Morning and night he knelt on his prayer-mat and made his devotions to Allah. But all he could think of in his waking hours was the horse whose beauty enchained him to that harsh land. A half year from the date of his coming, he left Arabia with the horse.”

“How?” asked Natty.

“I don’t know. But back he came, to Sussex and the green hedgerows, with Ayeesha.”

“I see. But no man comes to the dank, hidden glens up this county unless for a reason of his own.”

“Perhaps not.”

“What else happened?”

“He has been ill a week, seriously ill. I called on him twice, but I was unable to get into his room. We are neighbors, you know. Our friendship has not been close. You might call it a mere acquaintance. He is a recluse, lives alone, save for a dour English housekeeper.

“Outside of myself nobody knows him in the whole county. His housekeeper attends to all his business and meets the tradespeople, but she is taciturn. Spence I met first out in the field, near a stile when I was going over it from the back road. He returned the ‘good-day’ civilly enough. I could see he was a gentleman, and naturally I had some small curiosity, for strangers are few in our countryside and we were neighbors.

“He called on me once, to inquire about some hay. I had a field of rich lucerne, and he wished to buy a quantity for his horse. I invited him into the library. He came in and we spent an agreeable evening over a bottle of sherry, talking about one thing or another. I sold him the fodder, and had it stowed in his granary. A few nights later he came in again on business.

“A slight degree of intimacy sprang up. He told me all I have told you about the mare. I could see that he was holding something back. On some points he was silent. He never did make it clear how he managed to get the horse away. I don’t suggest for a moment he stole her. Spence is wealthy, I have found him

honorable in fulfilling his obligations.

“I doubt that anything more on him can be learned. His housekeeper, of course, will say nothing, and the two hostlers—they are newcomers—are mum.”

Natty lifted himself on his elbow.

“Two hostlers? Where are they from?”

“Foreign parts, that’s clear. Darker than Gipsies, and almost mute. At least they say nothing, not even good-day. They came a month ago, just before he fell ill. A good thing for Spence they came just then. They took entire charge of the mare, and glad to get the job, a few shillings a week and their lodging.”

“Their lodging? Then they don’t get their meals in the house?”

“No. They sleep in the loft of the granary, and sometimes they cook outside, when it isn’t raining.”

“I see,” muttered Natty, with a stalk of grass between his teeth. “And you’d like me to go there with you?”

“That’s why I came. There’s something funny about the whole business. I don’t like it. No man likes to see those weird goings-on so close to his home. What are these strange chaps doing there? What’s going to happen to Ayesha if it’s all over with Spence? He’s a very ill man. Dr. Evans, of the village, has been there several times, and he is unable to diagnose the malady. Thought it a tropical fever of some kind, but utterly beyond his experience, and he got in another doctor to hold a consultation, but they could agree on nothing. The patient is delirious.”

Natty got up, and buttoned his jacket.

“Start now, shall we? Jubal will leave with the Lees tomorrow and we’ll join the tribe later. D’you mind if the lad comes along? He knows three ways of speaking, and that’s handy in our trade.”

“Room for a dozen at my place.”

“Thank you.” Natty spoke absently, then walked off a space, then looked upward. It was as if he were judging the time by a mark in the heavens. He puffed at his brier, looking over towards the hills to the west, the road crossing them, and the motors and wagons going up to the horizon.

“I’m leaving now,” said the Captain, “I’ve a little business to attend to, but I think I shall be there when you show up. Good-day.”

Gwilym and Natty set out after midday. They rode in a trap, and the Gipsy

was dressed in a dark suit, with a bowler hat and collar, and looked like a merchant or professional man. He was in gay spirits, a sign that he felt there was adventure ahead.

“To think,” he laughed, “that lightning should strike twice at the same bush! Or almost the same bush, with another hukkaben t’other side the fence.”

The horse was a fleet bay, and Natty scarcely spared him except on the hills. They went back over exactly the same road on which they had come. They paused for refreshment at the same inn. Natty kept silent, however, and uttered hardly a dozen words until evening. He was ruminating the mystery, thinking, perhaps, less of the man than of the wonderful mare and of the reason for her appearance on that out-of-the-way farm, where no more than a handful of men might gaze upon her comeliness. Suddenly, he struck his leg with impatience, and looked at Gwilym.

“Did he say those two fellows ever talked?” he asked.

“Talked?”

“Aye. What language in?”

“The Captain didn’t say.”

“Arabic, I’ll wager you,” Natty grunted, then whispered and clucked to the horse. It laid back its ears and galloped off at headlong speed. Gwilym clung to both seat and hat, while the landscape rolled past them like a cinema film. They left the highway at a village, took a broken road for a short cut, then bogged several times in mud, for tractors and a scraper were working upon it. Natty groaned inwardly. Another mishap waylaid them a mile further on. The road was blocked, and a sign read: DETOUR. They had to go through a hedge and drive the horse at a walk along the edge of plowed fields. Nor when they regained the road could they go much faster. But they finally came to the valley, and in the light of the moon, pushing out round and golden from behind the shoulder of a hill, made out the farm of Nant Isaf.

Natty pointed to the moon with his whip.

“It’s full, d’you see? The first night of the full moon.”

“I see.”

“And you’ll remember,” said the Gipsy quietly.

They hastened on, and came to the stable of Nant Isaf. At the sound of their approach, there was the flash of an apron, and a maid hurried out.

“The Captain’s yonder at Mr. Spence’s place,” she said. “The house was full

of doctors all day. Three from London, besides Dr. Evans of the village. He was taken worse this morning, and the doctors couldn't find out what the matter was."

"One is enough," said Natty, unbuckling the horse. "I don't hold much by them myself. Two, and a patient may live; three and a man's done for."

"The poor gentleman's gone. He's been dead since six o'clock."

"What a pity." Natty gave a sad cluck, and administered a slap to the horse, who trotted at once for the stable. "Will you make us some tea?"

"Indeed, sir, I will. Captain Lewis has just finished his and gone over to look at the mare again."

"What's the matter with the mare?"

Natty looked anxious. The maid was a stupid, round-faced country girl, and she turned a slow gaze of surprise upon him.

"She's dead, too. Poisoned, the master says."

"What!" roared Natty. "The mare dead?"

"Yes, sir."

The effect of the news on the Gipsy was startling. He stood aghast, then, with an exclamation of fury, he ran out of the yard, vaulted the stile into the next field, and projected himself towards the paddock.

Gwilym followed. Over at the house were lights, and still more lights about the granary. Captain Lewis was there, talking with a constable and several neighbors. Two or three of them stood at the doorway, Gwilym looked in, and in the stall saw Ayesha, a lifeless white heap. The Gipsy was on his knees in the straw, hat pushed back, surveying her. He rose, dusted off his hands, and came out.

"Dead as a mackerel," he said to the Captain.

"A strange and woeful thing," said one of the neighbors. "The horse could not survive her master."

"Perhaps she couldn't survive arsenic," was Natty's retort.

They stared at him.

"Are you sure?" asked the Captain.

"No. I'm not sure of anything."

For an hour they loafed about the granary, talking; Natty moving all over,

hands behind his back, his head bowed in reflection. He was there when everybody else had gone, except for the few at the house. Then he and Gwilym strolled down the road to the village, such as it was—a public house, a shop, and an inn, with a handful of farm laborers still in the taproom. They recognized Natty, and taking him for a familiar instead of a stranger, they were willing to discuss the episode with him over the beer mugs.

“I’d give a pound to know where they’ve gone to,” he murmured. “Those hostlers.”

“They took it hard, I’ll warrant ye,” said a laborer, one of the shrewdest, who was an Englishman. “If anybody loved a horse, it was them. Aye, they loved her better than their mothers. Come snow on the pasture, they’d go out and dig here and there and find handfuls of sweet, green grass—that even a sheep couldn’t find, even if it was starving.

“All that fortnight of cold drizzly weather, with oats rotting in the fields, and hard to get men to work in the cold drizzle and mud, they’d be out at dawn. They plowed, trimmed hedges, milked the cows and ground the turnips, and didn’t turn in until long after the lights were doused at the house.”

The talk was in English. After an hour of it, the laborers, who could make out but a word here and there, departed, and the taproom was left to the three of them.

“I never had anything against those lads,” said the Englishman. “Though you might say they made it harder for the rest of us, working as they did—for just their keep, so I heard Mr. Spence say more than once. He was very near, you know; he squeezed his pennies.”

“You never got them to talk, did you?” asked Natty.

“Never a word. They could talk only with signs. As if they were deaf and dumb, but they weren’t. They talked with each other, and to Spence. Though in what language, we could never make out. Some said they were Gipsies. But I heard no Gipsy words; their skin was blacker than your hat.”

Natty saw to it that the Englishman’s mug was kept replenished. The more he drank, the more garrulous and confiding he became.

“No, they didn’t talk. But Mrs. Ayres, the housekeeper, she talked a few times to Hannah, the lass at our farmhouse yonder. Not much, just a little now and then, so we could piece out what was happening.

“One night Hannah took over to her a jug of barm for the breadmaking, and as she stood at the kitchen door she saw Mr. Spence throw a letter into the peat

fire; he watched it char to a square of white ash, then he laughed to himself. It gave her a queer feeling. She had never heard a man laugh like that before, savage and nervous-like. David Postman had brought the letter. It was not often he came with letters to Mr. Spence. And that night was the first time in months. Then the next week, the dark helpers came, just in time, too, for he grew ill all at once and took to his bed.”

“Had he ever been ill before?” asked Natty.

“Not so bad as that. Mrs. Ayres said a spell had come over him the year before, at about the same season. And both times he had been worrying a lot as if something had got into him he couldn’t shake off.”

He looked with a shade of anxiety at Natty.

“Nothing out of the way you see in that, is there?” he asked.

“No, why?”

“Nothing. I don’t hold by this talk of spells or bewitching, and I was wondering what you thought.”

“I think,” said Natty, rapping out the heel of his pipe, “that’s all nonsense. And the sooner folks get such ideas out of their heads the better.”

“That’s what I was telling everyone,” said the laborer.

After draining his mug, he shook hands warmly with them both and left. It was several minutes after he had gone when Natty and Gwilym went out. The road, silvered with moonlight, was clear. Not a soul was visible. Then the inn became dark, its dwellers had retired. The dew was falling and the air was surcharged with the odor of moss and fern. A nightingale uttered its sweet jugging note. Gwilym was impressed by the tranquillity and softness of the evening. His friend paused and looked up. The moon was rising in a serene and cloudless sky, silvering the valley, the cornfields and the slate roofs of Nant Isaf and the adjoining house where Mr. Spence had lived.

“Who would think, Young Master, that evil deeds had been wrought in this quiet countryside?”

“Do you think Ayeesha was really poisoned?”

“I wasn’t thinking about that at all, but I shouldn’t be surprised.”

“Why?”

“Ah, that is the question. I’m feeling for the answer now.”

Two men were standing under an elm tree before the gate of Nant Isaf. They

must have heard the approaching footsteps, for their heads turned, and their faces, looking straight up the road, were like pale discs in the moonlight.

“Ringo,” said Captain Lewis, “this is Dr. Evans. He attended Mr. Spence in his illness.”

“What does he make of it, Captain?”

“No more than before. A tropical malady of some nature.”

Both were looking intently at the Gipsy, who had filled his pipe and was directing his gaze at the adjoining farm, not in curiosity this time but in reflection. Gwilym had the feeling they thought the heart of the mystery was revealed to the shrewd, penetrating vision of the wanderer, the man cunning in the lore of horses and the road. They watched his face, illuminated in the flare of a match, the speculative eyes half veiled by the lids, and the crafty mouth that was not disposed to give away secrets.

“A malady of some nature,” he echoed smilingly. “I doubt, for the while, you’ll come any closer to it than that.”

“I am just a country practitioner,” said Dr. Evans, “and a fever of that sort, with delirium, was beyond my experience.”

“Is there to be an inquest?”

“No. There is no reason to suspect foul play.”

“Did he say anything in his delirium that sounded odd?”

Dr. Evans wrinkled his brow. He tried to recall, but it was difficult, for he had only called there a few times, staying no more than a quarter of an hour at each visit. Mr. Spence doubtless must have said a great deal, but the only person who could have heard much of it was the housekeeper, who had also been serving as the nurse, and her mouth was sealed by loyalty.

“I can’t think of anything just now. Except that he had much to say about brotherhood. Yes, that was the word—‘brotherhood.’ ”

“And I wouldn’t have thought him a religious man,” said the Captain.

“Did he mention ‘blood’ at any time?” asked Natty.

“Come to think of it, he did, once. I had a notion he wanted the horse bled. He may have suspected that Ayesha had fallen ill.”

“No,” said Natty. He lowered his voice. “I fancy it was not that at all. Something quite other.”

The Gipsy accent and phrases were no longer on his tongue as he spoke with

these Gorgios; he was even more a man of the world than they. His manner impressed them, drew them all into confidence.

“Doctor, if I am not asking what I have no right to ask, had Mr. Spence a certain mark on his person?”

The doctor frowned again.

“A mark?”

“Yes, nothing recent. A faint, white scar, as of a knife.”

“Sir, he had.”

Natty gave a satisfied nod. “An inch long, say, and a little above the elbow?”

“Exactly. You have seen it?”

“No. If I had, it would not have been necessary for me to ask.”

“What had this to do with his illness and Ayeesha?” Captain Lewis broke in impatiently.

“Rather more than you’d think,” said Natty. “And perhaps you had better tell the police to hunt for those two missing stable-boys.”

The Captain laughed grimly. “It’s the first time I ever heard a Gipsy searching for other Gipsies.”

“No, you didn’t hear that,” said Natty. There was reproof in his tones. “And you never will. Those weren’t Gipsies.”

“What then?”

“Arabs.”

Natty turned on his heels, “Good-night,” he said, and strode on, Gwilym beside him.

Captain Lewis’ hostler had merely wanted to cheapen Tonto, and scare off all possible buyers, so his employer would be glad to let the horse go for half a song; but there was no discernible motive in the actions of these vanished Arabs.

“I’ve got some thinking to do before we turn in tonight,” said Natty. The rest of the way to the inn they traversed in silence. For a while they stood in the inn yard, breathing heavily of the cool air before they retired to the stuffy little rooms with the lozenge-shaped windows. Natty knocked out his pipe and they mounted the creaking stairway to their chambers.

Gwilym had been in bed half an hour, reading a book by candlelight, when a rap sounded at the door. Natty entered, still fully dressed, and drew up a chair.

“I’ve got it!”

“What happened to Mr. Spence?”

“Aye, and to the mare likewise.”

Natty pointed to the window, with its glimpse of the light-flooded yard.

“It’s the full moon, the opening of the month of Ramadan, which is a feast month. That’s the holy month of the year to the Arabs. And the night of its full moon is like the Rommanies’ Day of Ash-Burning, which is Christ’s birthday.

“Mr. Spence came to his end on Ramadan. Last Ramadan he was distraught, as he was the year before. He and two Arabs were together. What could have brought them together, unless a bond of some sort?

“Dr. Evans said the sick man had spoken of ‘brotherhood’ and ‘blood.’ That confirmed what I thought, that Mr. Spence had taken the oath of brotherhood in the Arabian desert. He had gone through the ritual of exchanging blood, after making a knife cut in the arm. You remember, I asked if there was a knife-scar on Mr. Spence’s arm. The doctor said yes, and that put me on the right track at once.”

“It doesn’t clear it for me,” said Gwilym.

“It will in a moment. We know that he stayed a long while with the Arab tribe that owned horses in the desert. Those beautiful horses no man may own unless he be himself of the desert breed, or related to it by ties of blood.

“Mr. Spence was so related. Therefore he was entitled to such a horse. And to bind him to return, the Sheik, we may suppose, said:

“ ‘Our brother may go across the seas with the horse, but he must return to celebrate with us the feast-day of Ramadan.’ We may assume that Mr. Spence promised. So he came back to the South Country, and was most famous there because of his beautiful horse and the fame of his travels with the Arab people.”

Natty puffed at his pipe and gazed at the window.

“It came Ramadan, and Mr. Spence laughed and went to the horse-show, and won a prize. He was too far away to be troubled by Arabs, and since he had the mare, he gave no further thought to them.

“Nor did he go the next Ramadan. It was a fast-day, and he was a Arab blood-brother, but he drank ale, smoked, made merry, and perhaps danced, as

if Allah were naught. So lightly, Young Master, do some men regard their pledge.

“Perhaps a letter came to him from Arabia. If it did, that explains why for a while he was distraught. It reminded him of his promise. So to get further away he cut off the ties that bound him to his native region and came here to this West Country. But the Arabs sought him. They came after he had disregarded another letter and burned it in the peat fire.

“They came here and took the place into their hands. Mr. Spence knew it was fate and said nothing. And then he was punished. Ayeesha was as dead as a door-nail, and so was her master. And all this happened the first day of the Ramadan.”

“And what became of the dark helpers?”

“Gone. They are on their way back to Arabia.”

“Will the police catch them?” asked Gwilym, thinking of Natty’s counsel to the Captain and the doctor.

“No fear. They will have cleared out of the country by dawn.”

Natty untied his scarf, folded it, as was his custom before retiring, then sat upright and still, his eyes straying out the window.

“As a blood-brother to Arabs, Mr. Spence proved himself unworthy. He violated an oath and turned his back upon his kin. Just as there are men who turn their back on the drom and know their Rommany kin no more.”

A wave of cold crept over Gwilym. He sat up, trembling inwardly with fear. He thought of Taid, and the summons of the Whistlers’ whose van came to the hedge every spring. It seemed now less a van than a harbinger of death, a very tumbrel.

“They will not be killed?” he quavered.

“No. We are Rommanies. Our hand is against no one.”

“Then, Mr. Spence—”

“Of that I know nothing. Only God knew what was in the hearts of the two Arab men.”

Natty folded his arms on the window sill and looked out. He stood there long, in a reverie. Then he gave a low, trilling whistle, that sped out into the moonlight like the call of a wild bird.

“Can we bring him back to life?” he asked, turning to Gwilym. “No. Can we

put Ayeesha upon her feet? No. This is nothing I would care to be mixed up in. We do no good to anyone, staying here. Tomorrow we start out early. Good-night."

Gwilym, his head teeming with desert mares, Arabs, tales of vengeance and the words of Natty, was not visited by sleep until late, hardly before morning, for he was still drowsy when he was roused by the rap of the maid at the door. He flung himself out; through the window he saw that Natty was already up, walking up and down with his pipe before the inn. Soon they would be on the road again, then en route to the Sirnihatch. He was thankful that Taid had himself gone on the drom, had this time heeded the call of the tribal messengers.

On to the Sirnihatch

IT was Gwilym who saw the vans and tents first. The Lees were still at the copse. His companion looked at it in surprise.

“Wonder what’s up. I thought they’d be gone by this time.”

They turned into the meadow and everyone hailed them with shouts of welcome, as if the two had come back from China, or from jail. Gwilym was as pleased as if he were home again, he had a liking for the copse and the settled air of the camp, which had already its worn paths to the river and among the vans. Mammet’s father lifted his hat to him, and his old brown wife who was tending a pot, showered him with compliments.

“Avo, my fine little gentleman, will you have tea?”

He drank a cupful, dutifully, and answered their polite questions. They were curious to know where he had been, and they laughed a lot at hearing the adventure of Mr. Spence and Ayesha, thinking it more of a jest than a tragedy.

“When’s the Sirnihatch?” he asked. “I thought it was important.”

“Avo, that it is! But we’ll be going now. In the morning, belike. Now that Master Natty is here.”

Why had they held back? The Rommanies were all primed and ready, the brass of the vans and harness shining, the horses curried to the gleam of new kettles. They must have had some good reason. Just now animation ran through the camp. It was as if a new spirit had surcharged the tribe. They talked incessantly, but with low voice and slow pantomime. As for Natty, he had gone inside his wardo with Mammet, conferring on nobody knew what.

From what remarks he could pick up here and there, Gwilym worked it out that the trek had been postponed until Natty’s return; that a Ringo was most

likely to be the next King, and that the Lees were quite sensible of the advantage of riding to the Rommany Parliament with one destined to high place.

After the first buzzes of excitement, with ambassadors putting their ears against the side of the Ringo van—a sort of House of Lords—and bringing back words to be discussed at the campfires, there began a more decided preparation for the move. Axles were greased, there was a general scrubbing of pots. In the enthusiasm for cleanliness, some of the children failed to escape treatment with soap and water.

To keep out of the way, Gwilym went fishing, brought in a string of trout, but the folk were still busy. Osiers were long and pliable at the copse, and armfuls were cut and bound to be woven on the road. Bundles of skewers, made during the sojourn, were bound with wire. Gwilym helped Mammet's father give a lick of varnish to a pile of little wicker bird-cages. Scores were already dry, and had tenants in them. They were not very musical, their note was a rare chirp. Old Mr. Lee then sat on the ground with paraphernalia about him, and a sackful of birds, whose claws were white. He pulled them out one by one, and Gwilym saw they were either wrens or sparrows. That was the Gipsy way to catch them, smear branches with bird-lime, and as the birds stuck pull them off.

“Now for the chore of painting chillicos,” he said.

Gwilym found it amusing, that remark, for in Rommany “chore” meant a dodge or a practical joke. Mr. Lee, with spectacles on the end of his nose, gravely set to the task of painting the birds greenish-yellow, with a touch of gilt. A few strokes of the brush and they were transformed into canaries.

“Colored chalk paint,” explained Mr. Lee. “It'll wash off in the first rain. They's some dishonest folk with the devil in 'em, who puts on real paint that lasts a month. Now, sir, that's too much of a hukkaben. Werry wicked, you might say. Almost a swindle.”

Mr. Lee yellowed a beak and held up the bird proudly.

“Look at 'im. You couldn't tell him from a German Roller canary, worth more nor five shillings.”

“Is that what you get?”

“Lor', no! Us Lees never stoop to hukkabens, Young Master. Tenpence is the most we gets, and folks what think they can buy a regular songster for tenpence deserves to be took in.

“I don’t say as they don’t get their tenpence worth, neither. They gets a good penny cage; and a chillico with a little oats and pepper inside him sings better than most birds in a tree.”

Gwilym was now on the most excellent terms with the gobliness old fellow. Later he helped him grind some knives and cement a few broken and valuable old china plates which one of the boys then delivered at once to the owners in the village.

At night there was a banquet on the grass. It was the most impressive meal Gwilym had ever beheld. Together on the tarpaulin were huge barley loaves, crocks of butter, red Welsh cheeses like drums, tinned salmon, leeks, oatcake, scones, and tea. It was a banquet that took a long time to eat. It was far more enjoyable than the tea-and-concert things given by the Chapel Society at home, because the music was better. Instead of singing and wheezy harmonium, there were flutes, a drum, cymbals, a barrel-organ belonging to a Lee who had once owned a monkey, and a bagpipe, played by a tinker Lee who had spent months and months at an ironworks in Scotland.

There was Gipsy laughter and gaiety. Someone started a round and all clapped hands to the time of “B-I-N-G-O.” His name was Bobby Bingo!

Gwilym was on the outskirts of the crowd of fifty Lees, sitting at a corner of the tarpaulin, with his back against a wheel of Mammet’s wardo. The fires were all towards the further end where the Ringos and the oldsters were seated. He was too sleepy to join in the singing; just barely awake enough to hear and to be conscious of the lights and the distant swirl of the river, over which the wind came to him. He felt that he had been traveling since time began, that he had always been on the drom, and it seemed unreal that it all should end for him at the end of the road that would lead in the morning to the Sirnihatch.

A light was moving. He saw it through the wheel. Then he had the delusion that strange figures were patrolling the border of the camp.

A dog barked, once or twice, fitfully, but the others—and there were a dozen about, though most of them were asleep under the wardos—were mute; even if they were not asleep, they could have heard nothing above the uproar of song and instruments. The light twinkled behind him, like a glowworm, then vanished. He nodded, and just as his head dropped forward, he felt himself in the grip of powerful hands.

He struggled, then tried to scream, but a hand fell upon his mouth. Kicking, but helpless, he was dragged back, beyond the line of vans, beyond the trees, and into the meadow, where he was jerked roughly upon his feet.

“Have a look at him,” said a voice. “Give us the light.”

Two electric torches played into his face, blinding him.

“Looks like one of them to me,” said the voice. “It’s an Arab if there ever was one. He’s black, almost, and he hasn’t the Gipsy look in the eye.”

Gwilym blinked, and though he was thoroughly alert now, he felt stupid at the remark, he could not understand what it meant, except that it boded mischief.

“Where were you yesterday?” said the first man who spoke. He was a policeman.

“At Gareg Tir, sir. And Mr. Spence’s place.”

“Spence, eh? I must warn you that whatever you say may be used as evidence against you. Where’s your pal, the other Arab?”

“Let go of me!” Gwilym shouted in Welsh. “I’m no Arab. And I never knew Mr. Spence. I was there with Natty Ringo.”

One of the four men gave a laugh.

“Know me, do you? Ever seen me before? Look hard.”

Gwilym met his gaze and at once recognized him. It was Mr. Owen.

“Yes, sir. We cleared your granary of rats.”

“And about cleared me of all the loose change I had,” grunted the bearded chief constable. “Fifteen shillings, it was. Let him go, David.”

The policeman slackened his hold with reluctance.

“Sir, I think we ought to ask him a few questions.”

“Ask, then.”

“We’re looking for a pair of Arabs. They’re horsemen, they are, and black enough to be Gipsies. D’you know where we could lay hands on a pair of chaps like that?”

“There ought to be plenty in Arabia,” said Gwilym.

He never was able to tell afterwards whether he had said that as a jest, deliberately, or said the first thing that came into his drowsy head.

The chief constable laughed. “That’s a joke on you, David. Let him go.”

The chagrined policeman released his grip, and after watching the officers tramp off across the field, he returned to the camp, crawled under the wardo

where Sixpence was already asleep, and got under his blankets. He had been fortunate. It would have been jail if the chief constable hadn't recognized him. He trembled. This was being treated like a thief.

The party was still going on uproariously. He lay awake, listening to it for hours until the noise had abated and the last concertina was stilled. The lights went out.

"Hup-hup, Rommany!"

It was Mammet's voice, ripping out like a trumpet blast. Gwilym crawled out. It was still so early that the air was suffused with a lemon-green light. The morning star Venus glittered in the sky.

"Hup-hup, Rommany!" went the signal, as Mammet strode through the camp.

Figures emerged from van and tent. "Sirishan!" each murmured to the other. Gwilym ran to the stream and dashed water upon his face.

Breakfast was hasty, no more than bread and hot tea. Everyone was drinking steaming tea out of pannikins, for the drom would lead them into the uplands where the wind from the sea was keen and the warmth of the valley was far behind.

The camp broke up rapidly. Mammet, twirling his whip, strode about, a genial and helpful quartermaster. Gwilym helped case the tripod, irons, and tarpaulin into the box; gave Tonto a rub-down, and tied her to the tail of the wardo, then climbed in. He and Jubal had the seat to themselves. Gammer was riding with the elder women in old Mr. Lee's vehicle, and Natty had chosen to go with Mammet.

The little portable world of the Ringos moved with new splendor, for Jubal had given it a coat of fresh paint. He had also re-shod Tonto whose hoofs struck out smartly on the old Roman highway. The dawn was like a re-birth of the world and men. The air and the excitement filled Gwilym with an inner glow as if he had drunk wine. He had forgotten the encounter with the policemen last night, and the life of which he was a part was perfect. It was at moments like this that thought of returning to a roof seemed folly. It was hard to believe that people stayed home of their own will when they could see a fresh sunrise every morning.

They passed through a village. He looked at the stone houses, shuttered, with drawn blinds and bolted doors, and thought of the night-capped folk lying in a stupor on their beds, heedless of the miracle without, unaware of the sun, the flame-filled censer, pushing up above the horizon.

A van nosed in ahead of them, with wicker-cages hung all over its sides and the painted wrens were singing furiously, no doubt in protest at the jolting. The Rommanies seemed of unearthly aspect at this hour. With the dawnlight lustrous on their bronze skin and dark Eastern eyes, they looked as strange as if they had come direct from a foreign land. So they had, from the eternal drom and the world of moor and glen.

A merchant who was taking down his shutters turned about at the advent of the cavalcade. His scowl of enmity revealed a fear that they might set up booths or coconut-shies on the common and ruin trade for the day. Jubal, who had moved from the seat to the back of a Percheron, with feet on the shaft, tossed up an apple, caught it in his teeth and with a gulp made believe to swallow it. The merchant stared at him in consternation.

“Should have charged him a penny for that,” said Jubal, removing the apple from his mouth. “He’ll talk about it as long as he lives; aye, and for many wet nights at the tavern when talk falls flat.”

Gwilym almost rolled off his seat in laughter.

“If it wasn’t for gowks like that,” said Jubal, biting into the apple, “not a chillico could we sell.”

The caravan wove through golden haze, past hedges in flower, commons dotted white with geese, and neat cottages before which pink-cheeked old ladies sat knitting in the sun. It made a great stir, and at the jangle of harness and the droning roll of hoofs, people came out to look over the garden pickets or press their faces against the windows. The Rommany lurchers gave tongue at sight of a village dog; the barking sped from van to van, with the contagion of a brush fire.

Gwilym drove the Percherons. Jubal unraveled an end of rope, and made himself a tow beard, which he hung from his chin with sticking-plaster. It looked comical on his dark face.

They came into another village, Mammet’s wardo stopped at the post-office, and the caravan paused. Natty came out with only three or four letters, and one he fetched over to Gwilym. It was from Myfi:

“Dear Brother: I miss Twm-Twm. Be sure to bring him back and Taid. Lewis Tan Cottage has a white calf. There was a heron in the brook yesterday. Shan was angry at first when you left, but now she is very nice and I have butter on the table. Don’t forget to bring me a fairing. I forgot to say I got your letter. Love.

He already had fairings for her inside the wardo. And there would be more to be got at the Sirmihatch.

There was much stir in the caravan. The horses were watered at the trough and given their nose-bags. Gwilym jumped down to minister to Tonto, then tie her to a root in the stone wall over which there was shade. The Gipsies strolled in and out of the shops, or sat on the curb and munched honeycomb and oatcake. Just across from where Gwilym sat with Jubal was the school. The children came out into the yard, followed by the master who grouped them, struck a tuning-fork and held it up. It rang "Do," hum of a bee.

The children caught the tone and lifted their voices in "The Rising of the Lark." The Gipsies came over to listen. Women appeared at cottage doors, singing; the tobacconist and the grocer emerged from their shops and likewise sang. Natty, leaning against the shaft, joined in a bass. The entire street was vocal, as full of vibrant sound as an organ-pipe. Gwilym was reminded of his own village, and the walk with Taid and Myfi thither of an evening, at music time, when the householders sat on the doorsteps to sing under the leadership of Elias Schoolmaster.

After it was over, Natty recovered his breath and said, "It's a singing country. That's why a man is glad to get back to it from the Scots and Anglaterra.

"Years back, when I was a bit of a chavo, no higher than that, I was singing to myself near a cornfield. I heard a shout, and a reaper came to me with anger on his face.

" 'You've frightened the geese in the next village,' he said. 'And a trouncing you should get for that.'

"He gave me a cuff, and then a lesson. A mighty good lesson it was. We sang for an hour under the hedge. I've been a grand warbler ever since. And you don't know, Young Master, how it pains my ears to hear Jubal sing like a dying rabbit."

"Hey, hey!" protested Jubal. "Don't I play the squiffer?"

They fell a-talking, the brothers, and Jubal remarked he had seen a patteran at the water trough, a circle with an arrow through it, and done with a stick that had an iron ferrule.

"That should be Lora Zangarelli's Mike," said Natty. "The show mob's gone up by that toll road. But no time marks, eh?"

“Not of the mob.”

“We’ll turn them back if they’ve got motors, even if it was King Pendency himself.”

The Lees and the Ringos were ruled by a hatred of motor-cars. They were horse people, and their culture was a horse culture, part of the religion of the road, and to which they had clung for centuries, and those of the blood who should ride about in a device of steel and rubber were traitors and heretics.

“Watch out at the next stop,” said Natty. “Mammet and I will go ahead and watch on the moor road.”

When he was gone, Jubal shook his head.

“They can’t, I tell you. The Rommanies in Wales are for the horse, but those of us rolling in from Anglaterra—who knows how they will come?”

“How do you stand?”

Jubal showed his stubby, iron-blackened fingers.

“Iron is iron, whether in a horseshoe or in an engine. I’m one Ringo says let the motor-car come if it must. Not that I would have Natty know what I say. But it all comes to the toss at the Sirmihatch. That’s why all us Ringos and Lees, horse folk, will be there.”

It came fairly clear to Gwilym, when they were on the road again, why Taid had gone on so swiftly and before the season’s call. He was a “Gryemengro,” a horse-master. And then it was revealed to Gwilym like a flash of light why he was in the caravan, and Tonto with him. He framed a question that would draw the answer to dispel the mystery.

“How long—how long have you known I was a Ringo?”

He trembled as he asked it.

If Jubal had been given a secret to guard, he was certainly taken off guard by the inquiry, innocent on the face of it.

“Why—always!” He flicked the whip over the horses. “Always. The Anwyls of Moor House, they’re as Rommany as Saint Sarah.”

“Who’s Saint Sarah?”

“A good Rommany saint she was, far down in the French land. There’s a statue of her in a church, and it’s as black as a rook.”

Gwilym pondered for an hour, nursing an inner elation. How simple it all was now, how clear the reason for Taid’s going, and for the indirect and

shrewd counsel of Elias Schoolmaster.

The caravan reached wild country. Moss oaks and bogs white with flax blossom were the characters of the rugged slope that led far upwards to Lake Geirionydd and the field of the Sirnihatch. They came into a grove at dusk. It was not a camp but a resting-place. A dozen wardos were already in-spanned; horses were grazing; iron kettles were steaming over tripod fires. The scent of tea and grilled herrings was in the air, and the greetings of Rommanies of Wales to Rommanies from the marches of the border and England. Gammer, with a bright new kerchief on her head, was already hobbling by to hunt up a crony.

Gwilym walked about as Jubal took charge of the horses.

“Hello—here he is! Sirishan!”

It was Lora and Mike who came over smiling, extending to him the hand of welcome.

Then it was “Sarishan!” elsewhere, and “Kushti bak!” That there were no show wagons, except one or two battered Punch-and-Judy vans, disappointed Gwilym. The Sirnihatch would be tame to anyone who should wish to be amused. Lucky for him he had already bought Myfi’s fairings. The campfires were lit early, and the travelers grouped about them, squatting with pipes and cans of tea, talking with gravity. Matters of state, he thought, for the talk was not only in Rommany, but in the deep, tinker language, Kinnick, which was spoken only off the highway and in wardos and the seclusion of guarded camps.

Old Mr. Lee, Mammet’s father, was speaking louder than most, with excited gestures, in Kinnick, and Gwilym could not make out a word of it. The scissors-grinders did, all of them, and likewise the poorer of the wanderers who had come into the grove before the caravan, and were skewer-makers by calling. He moved about, exploring the camp, with Sixpence at his heels.

“Kushti bak!”

An odd-looking fellow in shirt-sleeves, who was sitting on his wardo steps, painting a fresh nose on a Punch, had spoken to him.

“Sarishan!” said Gwilym in respect.

“Hello, what have we here? Whose pitch are you with?”

“The Ringos, sir.”

“Funnier and funnier! And I took you for a Gorgio.”

“But why?”

“That juckal of your’n. He’s no lurcher like a proper Gipsy dog, but a blooded setter, or else I’m a blind man. Sit down here.”

The man turned a sharp eye on him now and then, but kept on painting, touching up a number of puppets he had on the floor of his wardo, then putting them on the grass to dry. This was a real showman, for he had a naphtha lamp flaring brightly above the steps.

“And I actually took you for a Gorgio, which you are not, eh? And you’re going up to the Sirnihatch to see the King and all the swells? Strike me—but you ARE a lucky one! I’m lucky myself. And do you know why?”

“Because you’re not a Rommany.”

“That’s just it! I goes with ’em because I likes ’em. Leave you alone, they do. But once you’re with ’em, they looks after you. Look a bit pale-like, don’t I?”

“I’ll be browner in another week. Winters I run my puppet show in London, and come spring I drop it to go with the Lees on the drom. Puppets in winter—Crusaders, Kings, and Popes—and in spring just Punch and his Judy.” He sang in a loud and cracked voice, “Aye, he is true—true, ever true to his raggedy Moll!”

Gwilym didn’t know whether he meant he was true or Punch was, but the oddity and the gay spirits of the pale showman quite entranced him.

“I think you are very fortunate, sir. It must be fine to be a Punch-and-Judy owner.”

“Well, now, is it? It could be worse, but it could be better. How often do you pay a penny to see a Judy show? Not once a year, do you now? No more does anybody else. But they thinks nothing of paying a shilling every week to see a foolish lot of shadows on a sheet. That’s vicious, sir! That’s what the cinema does, takes the bread out of a poor man’s mouth.”

It sounded like a tirade, but it wasn’t. The man grinned and laughed as if he took it all as a good joke upon himself.

“Now, in this part of Wales there isn’t any cinema. So Punch and his owner lives like real gentlemen. And so would any good musicker that joins up with us. D’you know music?”

“I can play a little on the organ, sir, and I know harmony and part-singing.”

“That’s a help. But it’s just ABC to real music. You’ve got a lot to learn

yet.” He lifted his eyebrows encouragingly at Gwilym, then gave a slow wink. “I can learn you, I think. If I can learn a hare, I can learn a boy, if he’s a bright ’un.”

The showman brought out a green painted box, opened it and drew up a hare. “If you tie up your setter to yon tree, I’ll be obliged.”

Gwilym did so. By the time he returned, the hare was sitting atop the box, like an acrobat on a platform. It was a bold-eyed animal with an embroidered cap that had a feather to it like a barrel-organ monkey. It thwacked at a little drum with a stick bound to a paw. The showman blew into a row of penny whistles fixed in a sort of collar, and played an accordion. The uproar brought to the spot a group of Gipsy urchins who stood about in a ring, entranced, their eyes like saucers.

“Behold Lupo, ladies and gentlemen!” orated the showman, bowing low with a sweep of his hat. “Lupo, the King of the Trained Hares, who has performed before all the crowned heads of Yurup and Ameriky. He will give a special performance tonight for your benefit, a two-guinea show, free, gratis, and for nothing.”

The children gave squeaks of delight. The hare thumped furiously, its ears laid back, its eyes projecting like knobs, gazing as if hypnotized on the sputtering naphtha lamp.

“Now then, young Mr. Ringo—beggin’ your pardon if that ain’t your title—see if you can play a chord for him to drum to.”

Gwilym donned the row of whistles, slung the accordion from his neck, and tried to work both at the same time. He could only blow discord from the whistles, and since he was unable to bend his neck he couldn’t search for the keys; not that he could tell which row was which.

“Good,” said his tutor encouragingly. “Now see if you can bang the cymbal atop the squall-box.”

Gwilym tried, but the sound was like the jangle of a kettle-lid. Just then he saw Jubal in the group looking on, now swelled by a score of adults.

“What’s this?” muttered Jubal.

“I was just teaching him a bit of music, Mr. Ringo,” said the showman, with a little bow and a conciliating rub of the hands. “I didn’t know but what he might like to learn a trade.”

Jubal shook his head.

“It’s no go, Job Plover. The chavo’s brought up to be a Grymengro and not a tinker or a Punch-and-Judy grifter. Every man to his calling, after all.”

“Well, he played the whistles right handsome,” protested Job.

“No matter,” said Jubal, twirling his shabby hat thoughtfully. “We knows his calling. D’ye jin who the chavo be?”

“No.”

“Tummas Anwyl’s grandson.”

Gwilym was unprepared for the look of awe and fear on Job’s face, and he wondered what difference that made anyway. He was sorry that had been brought up. His prospects of a bright career with puppets and a trained hare had been choked in the bud. And he felt he had been set apart instead of being allowed to mingle on terms of equality with really wonderful people like Job Plover.

“I was looking for you,” Jubal said as they walked away, going by a path that wound through trees. He went first, in half darkness but with an instinct for the track.

“Can you hear anything down below?”

They emerged on the road, a stone’s throw from the camp, of which they could only see the lantern glims. Gwilym strained his ears. What he could make out was a muffled coughing. It grew louder and was diversified with a jangle of machinery. Jubal, leaning against an oak, hearkened to it moodily.

“Dunno what’s got into them to hunt for trouble like this. They should know by this time. Natty’ll give them what-for, you bet!”

The vehicle crawled up, plunging into the ruts and swaying on the embedded boulders, but pushed on by its asthmatic engine. As it drew past them, Gwilym had a glimpse of an ancient motor-car with Gipsy women in kerchiefs lurching together on the seat and a driver hanging grimly to the steering-wheel. The hood was bound with a rope; so dented was the body that it might have been of black paper; the gears squealed for lack of oil, and within rattled and groaned the antiquated chain-drive.

“Wouldn’t give a penny for it,” said Jubal. “Not even for the junk.”

He shifted his posture, his eye followed it, and both of them held their breaths to see what would happen.

They heard Natty’s voice: “Halt!” Then a sound as of running feet, with a clustering of lanterns at the turn of the road.

"I told you it would come," said Jubal. "Trouble already."

The argument was loud by the time they arrived. Natty, erect and angered, stood facing the driver, a head taller than himself. Jubal glanced at the faces in the car; the women were old, one of them even more ancient and weather-beaten than Gammer.

"Lees, they are," he whispered to Gwilym.

The driver spoke in Kinnick, and Natty, not being a tinker, in straight Rommany.

"There's no law against it!" shouted the Lee. "By the hand of my father, I'll come to the Sirnihatch as I see fit! On shoe-leather, or horseback, or in a wheelbarrow, or by engine."

"You swear by your father," girded Natty. "He never came by engine."

"No, he came on wheels. Who cares how wheels is rolled, by a grye of flesh or a grye of iron?"

"I do, by the Lord!" shouted Natty. "The horse has been good enough for the Ringos and the Lees since the first Rommany came out of Persia."

"A Daniel!" quavered Mammet's father. "A Daniel come to judgment!"

The oldest juva got out of the car, leaning on her staff, and pushed up her face into Natty's. He had to throw his head back, a gesture that almost betokened retreat. She blinked at him.

"A 'a Daniel' he pens! Ha-ha!" she shrieked with a derisive laugh. "Can ye remember the days when we Rommanies saddled the hoof with homes on our backs like the bawris-snail? Can ye? No! Old Mother Chilcott jins them days. And the wise Daniels that put the curse on folk that rode on the drom in the wardo.

"Have ye a wardo, Daniel? Then shame on ye! Hide your face and go afoot, go ribs-down in the dust, like the adder, and call yourself a man if ye can!"

It was a facer. Natty opened his mouth, closed it, then looked about him with dignity. He found small consolation about him. Someone guffawed. Mirth crackled, then the listeners roared in laughter.

"Perhaps I was wrong," he said, dabbing at his forehead with his kerchief. "Aye, perhaps I was.

"Make way, there! Let Mother Chilcott and her folk pass in."

The juva hustled back into her seat, snorting with triumph. She should take

care of herself in any tussle, the durable old matriarch who has seen ninety winters, at least, come and go on the eternal drom, and was full of lore and wisdom.

“Gammer!” shouted Natty, walking by the side of the noisy car. “Gammer, fetch her in to tea.”

Jubal and Gwilym fell in behind with the respectful crowd.

“That’s an honor,” Jubal whispered. After that he preserved an uncomfortable silence.

“It made me creepy,” said Gwilym, “the old juva and the way she downed him.”

Jubal changed sides. “Aye, the devil take her! Maybe she wasn’t wrong, but no more was Natty. What’s a-coming to us if the drom goes black with noisy motor-trucks? We might as well live on the railway, and it’s good-bye to the old life.”

“We can live on the moors.”

Jubal was lost in his own thoughts. He gave an abashed laugh. “Fancy Natty going and getting caught like that!”

It was an event, Gwilym felt, of considerable importance. The whole camp was discussing the tiff. Some of the Rommanies thought Mother Chilcott a prophetess, and that horses would be as scarce as giraffes, if they did not vanish altogether. Half the camp was gloomy, the other reflective; and all sat about the fires drinking tea. Mother Chilcott and her relatives sat before Natty’s wardo, sipping with the Ringos and the upper Lees. Out of green cups, too, instead of the common white. That was an honor to her, as if she had been royalty. It was a courtesy to offset the flurry that had marred the arrival of one of such advanced age.

Job Plover, the showman, and Gwilym, watched her from the dark shadow of the trees.

“I’m just a poor Gorgio,” said Job. “But Natty wasn’t too far wrong. Motor-cars and traffic policemen, they’ll be the death of us.”

He began to tell of Natty’s fame, how he had heard of his “horse cleverness” as far away as London and the banks of the Wash and in the fens of Lincolnshire. And didn’t he himself come to Wales to get away from the bustle and machinery of London, where the noise was enough to drive one mad and the petrol fumes enough to asphyxiate one?

“Oh, he’ll put a stop to that!” said Job in a loud, exultant voice. “Wait till he gets to the Sirnihatch! He’ll tell ’em!”

His blitheness was hardly convincing, somehow. No one had the least idea what was going to happen. Gwilym crawled sadly under the wardo. It had shocked him to see Natty, the Olympian, the champion of the moor fights and the wily general of the road, beaten by an old dame hardly fit for anything but to gather sticks or skin a hedgehog. It shook his faith in the idea that this was the best of all worlds and ruled by the wisest.

And what would become of Natty’s plans, his vast ambitions to make either himself or Thomas Anwyl King of the North Welsh Gipsies, if the day of the horse folk was over? He was nothing if not a crafty man, and must have thought Taid a craftier, else he would not have sought his aid so subtly and persistently all these years, as if in an effort to turn the tide. Still, if no more motors came into the caravan, their chances of luck seemed fair. Gwilym rolled himself in a blanket, and with the laughter of old Mother Chilcott still echoing in his ears, lay down.

The morning journey to the edge of the moor was brief, hardly more than three hours, going smartly. Natty and Mammet drove first, and the wardos were scattered along for a quarter of a mile, Mother Chilcott’s rattle-box of a car at the end of the procession. Where the road turned to wind at the hilltop, Jubal put out his head, nudged Gwilym and pointed to the bottom of the valley.

“There she is,” he remarked. “She laughs best who comes last.”

They had risen now into a bleak world where a great and heavy silence reigned, except for a thin, shivering breeze that ruffled the expanse of heather. Scraps of mist lifted from the hollow below. In it was a lake, bounded at the other side by sheer, bare hills with detritus at their feet and immense boulders. The water was still and leaden. The loneliness and majesty of the scene weighed heavily on the spirits of the pilgrims.

It was Lake Geirionydd. Taid had spoken of it often, and legends of it were in a book at Moor House, from which Taid read passages aloud to the children and Shan at her knitting. A tall, frost-clipped monument of stone guarded a hillock at the near end of the lake, where the bards and the poetry-worshippers of the region came to pay their respects, for under it was buried Merlin the Enchanter, who had seen wonders here when the world was young.

Jubal pulled up the horses. They were winded after the ascent. He pointed with his finger.

“A mournful place, my chavo,” he said. “That hill, I have heard the folk

hereabouts call it Pen Llythrig-Y-Wrach—the Witch’s Slide. In olden time the peak-hat ladies slid down there, screeching for the fun of it. The way the echoes go here, it must have been a horror to listen to.”

The whole caravan had paused. All eyes were looking into the depths of the hollow, as if for a sign.

“There was a King lost a cutlass there once,” Jubal remarked.

“The sword of Excalibur,” said Gwilym. “Merlin got it from the Goddess of the Lake and gave it to King Arthur. It worked magic, they say. After King Arthur’s death it was hurled back at the lake, and a hand rose from the waters to receive it.”

“Spoken like a book. And that’s pretty close to the gospel truth,” said Jubal with a shudder.

The Rommanies still had their heads out of the wardos, and were gazing into the lake as if expecting to see a huge dripping fist lift to darken the sky.

Mammet’s wardo went on; the caravan followed, and at the other side of the gorse-clad hillock the vista stretched before them of a flat of heather prinked with tents, horses, vans, a large marquee, and many motor-cars. The tents were in rows, and reminded Gwilym of the encampment of the Israelites in his large picture Bible.

Jubal squinted against the sun and made out the design of the wardos.

“Welsh,” he said.

But it was the motors he had on his mind. There were fifty or sixty of them, some as rickety as old Mother Chilcott’s, others splendid road-ships worth a fortune. He sighed. “No man could tell where they’re from. Except they’ve come in by the North Road. Nothing Welsh about them. My, won’t Natty be wild!”

Jubal took a deep breath.

They watched Mammet’s wardo plunge ahead, with a final gallop, and pull up near the marquee. Natty jumped out. He tightened his belt, set his hat over an ear, and strode to the entrance, with riding-whip under his arm. He was fully as dignified as the group of tall fellows who stood there, one conspicuous in a white hat.

“Lord Carramoore,” said Jubal. “A fine Grymengro he is. Boro mushis and bitti mushis—great men and little men are the same when it comes to a horse.”

Natty was deep in the ritual of greeting and being greeted.

He waved to indicate the caravan he had led to the Sirmihatch. The group at the marquee, including Carramoor and a stout, aged man with a white beard, lifted their hands in welcome, and it wheeled up; all the “Roms” lifting their hats as they drove by. All save Jubal and Gwilym, for Jubal cut out of line and drove off behind the marquee.

“Jump down and pad Tonto away beyond the paddock,” he said. “D’you see that wild plum tree? That’s a good, quiet spot.”

Gwilym obeyed, wonderingly. He lashed the mare to a branch, tied a blanket on her, and fetched over an armful of hay from the paddock, where a score of well-tended horses were champing on the turf.

“It’ll be a grand Sirmihatch,” affirmed Jubal, who had come to join him after the wardos were in place.

He leaned on the fence, with a foot on a rail. More caravans came in from the North Road and from the valley. The moor had taken on the movement and life and color of a fairground, save that there was much lifting of hats and hand-shaking. A motor-lorry, crammed with hilarious young men in yellow mufflers and velveteen, chugged past them. More tents were set up. From the Zangarelli wardo an awning was stretched and held up by gilded poles. Job Plover had dropped the end of his van to display a stage that framed a mute Punch and Toby.

“The yellow mufflers—all Chilcotts,” mused Jubal. “The Lockes are strong this time.” He checked off the groups with a mutter. “Barwells, Smiths, Lees, and there’s a brace of Stanleys. There used to be more. The Stanleys was high up, once. Queen Charlotte Stanley was next to the Queen of England one time. The Ringos were great then, too.”

He glowered about him as he rammed tobacco into his clay pipe.

“For every grai there’s a motor. Never saw so few horses afore.” He turned to Gwilym, “I say, what are you looking at?”

But Gwilym jumped from the wall, tore across the paddock and flung himself around the neck of a shaggy pony. It was Twm-Twm, who snorted and pawed, half in recognition and half in protest at being strangled. He was led up unwillingly from his hay.

“Moor House pony, ain’t he?” asked Jubal.

“Yes. And Taid’s somewhere about. I must find him.”

“You will. No hurry,” breathed Jubal, keeping his eyes on Twm-Twm. “That’s about as rough a pony as I ever saw. And the finest. Value fifty

guineas if a penny. It's a Gryemengro owns him, that's why."

His lips moved in audible thought, and Gwilym drew nearer to hear what he was saying.

"There were thirty Ringos, all that was left. Then came the War, and after that there was just three on the drom. Just three, with no grand heads among them, beggin' Natty's pardon. But there was one off the drom with as good a head as old King Pendency Bosvil; better, some says. You are hearin'?"

"I'm listening, Jubal."

"And so we thought, belike if the message is sent to him—"

"The whistling in the spring, that was," said Gwilym.

"That was it—a sort of reminder, delicate-like. If a man hears it often enough, it may come upon him to answer it and go."

"If he didn't?" Gwilym asked, then thought of Mr. Spence and the Arabian steed. He knew he would hear of it often. It was a story that carried home, and he had been one of the figures in an episode which had now been crystallized into an undying legend.

"Spring will come again," said Jubal. "It always does, and the Ringos know how to wait."

They took several turns up and down the ground, looking at the animals and vehicles. A sharp tang was in the air; there was exhilarating laughter and talk, and a great going to and fro of well-set-up and vagabondish men in corduroys, and women in garish finery. Jubal talked all the while; Gwilym divined that the Gipsy was reluctant to let him go, and was clinging to him as if he were the sole link that bound him to the once noble past of his family. Besides, they were thick friends: they had seen many sunrises together and fallen asleep at the same hedge campfire.

"Look." Jubal jerked his thumb. "That's King Pendency's."

It was a huge motor-car with a canvas top, new and grand. A group of delegates hung around it, slapping it respectfully and giving the tires a kick of approbation. It was plain to see that they were also consumed with envy.

"Yes, that's his'n. Pendency rides about like a settled Earl. He can't tell a horse from a goat, except for the horns."

A man cast a glance at Jubal.

"Knows cars though, he does. And he'll win again. There's plenty motor-mengros here, I tell you."

“Plenty Gryemengros, too,” said Jubal.

They both laughed, so did Gwilym, and they listened to the scattered talk as they pushed slowly through the mob. A race was to be held that afternoon, and that was the chief topic, not who would be King.

They bumped into Natty, who said at once, “It’s Honor Bright.”

That was Carramoor’s filly, two years old and fifteen hands high, and the Earl had come to race her against all comers.

“Any bets on Tonto?”

“Not a penny. No use trying to hunt for bets, neither, no earthly. The Rommanies haven’t won in five years.”

“Will this time, though.”

“Won’t they,” chuckled Natty, knocking the wood off the fence.

The crowd was now beginning to stream into the great marquee. It was full of sound, clapping and talk, and a hundred of the guests lucky enough to have chairs were sitting about in a circle, three rows deep. In the middle was a low platform where a continuous show was going on. The marquee was a sort of Parliament House, and also a kind of easy-going music-hall, for performers came up, in corduroys, sang songs, danced, whistled as they rattled crackers, like the Negro minstrels on the beach; or played squiffers and penny flutes. It was all very great fun, and everything was free: the seats, the cigars, and drinks from pails of lemonade that were carried about by girls. The rear of the hall was formed by a row of wardos backed in, and the Ringos and Gwilym sat on a pair of steps.

“I don’t quite know what’s happening,” said Gwilym.

“Oh, it’s like the Eisteddfod—you just sits in and listens and looks on,” said Jubal.

He pointed, then, to a paunchy gray man with sweeping mustachios, a pipe, and a hat. He was the only one wearing a hat.

“That’s the King. Pendy Bosvil, himself.”

A group of elders were about him, one of them Earl Carramoor, who had worn a high white hat outside, but was politely unbonneted now. A jovial group, on the whole; laughing and talking, raising their voices high when the accordions or flutes became too noisy. A few of them were rich or sporting farmers of the neighborhood.

“They own the moor horses we saw in the paddock,” said Natty. “And they’d all like a cut of Carramoore’s hundred-guinea purse.”

Gwilym stared. He saw not the King nor any of the entourage but a robust man, dressed in the garb of a rich peasant farmer, with corduroys and gaiters. There was no mistaking that dark face with the ruddy cheeks. Three squiffer players were going hard at “Hob-y-Derry-Dando,” standing in a row on the platform, pumping out the feverish melody as if life depended on it. The man jumped to the platform, crouched, then danced, his feet shooting in and out in a barbaric measure. With hands above his head, he rattled cracker-bones. So swift, charming, and graceful was the dance that everyone broke into applause. Then he vaulted from the platform in a somersault.

“Taid! Did you see him?” cried Gwilym, with pride.

“Aye,” said Natty. “We did. As good an acrobat as any in Wales.”

Gwilym was about to dash forward, when Natty seized his arm.

“No hurry. Listen to Carramoore.”

The Earl bent forward, hands on a chair, to address the crowd.

“Rommany chals, Gorgios, and friends all.” His florid countenance, like John Bull’s, beamed twinklingly upon them. “You’ve got some horses, eh?”

“We have!”

“Right-o!”

“Well, to make a short speech shorter, so have I.”

The Earl shoved a hand into a capacious pocket and drew out a heavy little sack. He held it out, and the monarch accepted it with a bow.

“There’s a hundred guineas there in the King’s fist. He’ll open it for the winner.”

“Rah for his Ludship!”

“Hup-hup!”

As the cheers rang, everyone surged out, then pressed to the road. The women were already sitting on the bank. King Pendy’s motor-car was out; a dozen men were in it, mostly small wiry fellows; and Natty gave Gwilym a shove up and into a seat.

“There y’are. You’ll ride on to the monument with the rest of the jockeys. Jubal’s waiting at t’other end.”

That was all. Gwilym felt a bit confused; he had never been in an automobile before; and when a lever was pulled and the motor-car jerked, stuttered, then plunged like a rocking-horse snatched on by a rope, he felt both ill and alarmed. But the shock was over in a moment, and at the end of the mile they all piled out.

The jockeys stretched their arms, capered heavily, then sat by the roadside to smoke until the horses should come up. Half of them were Gipsy lads, half of them plowboys from the nearby farms. They had all a longish wait ahead of them, for their mounts were to be walked up slowly, led, as was the ritual in these moor races, by their owners or trainers.

Jubal gave Gwilym a nudge, and they strolled a hundred paces down to the lakeside, beyond sight and ear-shot. Gwilym had been nervous in the crowd. He felt suddenly calm here by the water, with Jubal sitting cross-legged on the myrtle, smoking his clay and gazing contentedly over the water.

“Occurs to me y’ought to have a quirt,” the Gipsy remarked. “I’ll make ye one.”

He plucked off a myrtle branch, stripped it of leaves, trimmed the ends neatly with his knife, then pulled out of his pocket a twist of hay and separated the stalks. With these, his deft fingers wove a pattern about the handle of the quirt.

“That’ll give ye a grip. And also a bit of kushto—good luck. This comes from Tonto’s grazing field. You’ll lash her with a strand of the hay that fed her.”

“Look, they’re coming!” said Gwilym. “Hadn’t we better go now?”

The farmers were nearing the starting-post with their horses. Hand to the bridle, they were walking slowly, to keep the mounts fresh and relaxed.

“No hurry,” said Jubal, relighting his pipe.

“Some of the chaps are already up.”

“Much good it’ll do ’em,” chuckled his mentor; and he rose, brushing off his corduroys, as if he had a world of time before the race. “You’re in no hurry.”

Gwilym felt in a dream when he got up to the road, but calm, nevertheless, for such was the influence of Jubal’s ease and humor; and he was the last to mount. He had never before taken part in a race. It wasn’t to be any such race as he had seen at the fairs, with weighing, handicaps, and jockeys in bright colors. This was just a rough-and-ready scrimmage, a free-for-all, and the devil take the hindmost.

Everyone was jolly, though. The jockeys grinned and bragged, and pulled their caps over their eyes. The horses stamped and whinnied. Tonto pranced as if she were on a hot boiler-plate. Gwilym pawed for the stirrups, lodged his feet and drew on the reins. A deadly fear of losing came over him. It fastened like a band across his throat, and he lifted his hand to free himself of the clutch.

“There’s your quirt,” said Jubal, holding up the myrtle branch. “There’s magic in it, if ye lay it on hard enough.”

“Thanks.”

His back was thumped mightily. “Ride for the Ringos, ye buckeen!”

“Poom!” went the pistol.

Twelve horses bounced in a gallop. The wide road was none too wide after all for these squirming, elongated streaks of brown. Three or four banged out in collision, with explosions of leather, and rolled over in the ditch. Another tussle was imminent at the back. To escape, Gwilym leaned over Tonto’s neck and lashed at her forelegs. She scudded, she drummed, she achieved a flight, with hardly a clack of her hoofs.

Another horse broke ahead, five others brought up the rear, spaced in a semicircle, like the edge of a fan. The horse ahead stumbled. That was bad luck, but after bad comes good. Tonto leaped over the struggling mass. Gwilym lashed like a madman, glued himself flat, rested his chin on her mane, and peered ahead between her ears, drove his knees into her ribs. Tonto floated, with an occasional impact on the road that was like a jump off a diving-plank; her legs drove straight out, the knees up to her muzzle. Under the saddle was a tremendous thudding; that was her heart. He screamed encouragement, but the wind forced the sound down his throat, and drove a blizzard of slaver at his face, so that he was almost blinded. Tonto was no longer on the rim of the fan. She had drawn out and left it far behind.

Kerchiefs waved at him; the white post, the women on the bank, a scattering of figures along the road, made a blur. Cheering, the deafening yells of “Hup-hup, Rommany!” broke at him, like a sudden letting-off of bomb-shells. This must be the end. He rose in his saddle and hauled Tonto upon her hind-legs.

“Yup-ho! Bravo, my raklo!” shouted Natty.

The Gipsy flung himself up, grabbed Gwilym off the saddle, let him down, and pounded his back.

“Sup-mi-Duvel, I never saw finer jockeying! Choke me if I ever did.”

Then they both leaped into the ditch, and a burst of horses swirled where they had stood. They climbed the bank, to be rushed and chivvied by a delirious mob that thwacked them joyfully with caps and kerchiefs, laughing, shouting, swearing gaily and dancing, for this was the first time in years a Rommany had won the Sirnihatch race.

Natty and Gwilym wriggled out of the mob alive but breathless and dizzy, with sweat running into their eyes. Then the Committee of squarish hats came smack at them. King Pendy, his little eyes gleaming, held out the sack.

“There’s the wongur—a hundred guineas.”

They shook hands solemnly. King Pendy opened his mouth to force out words of praise:

“You’re a Gryemengro I says it. Aye, a Gryemengro!”

“Thanks, Your Highness,” said Gwilym.

Or rather he gasped the remark, and after a bow he moved away, dizzy, with a roaring in his ears as if he had come up after a dive, and was half drowned. He wanted to flee to quiet and where he would be alone. The paddock was close by; he could see Twm-Twm, and painfully he began to climb the rails. He was just about to throw his leg over the top when he was snatched off in a mighty hug.

“So here you are!” a jolly voice boomed at him in Welsh. “And how are you?”

“Da iawn, Taid.”

“And how was it on the drom?”

“First-rateus, sir.”

Taid seemed to be ruminating, then a smile gathered at the corners of his mouth, slowly.

“And so here you are!”

“Yes. I didn’t quite know what you’d think. I thought you might be angry.”

“Oh, no.”

“Or surprised?”

“Not surprised at all. Elias Schoolmaster sent me a telegram to say you had started off safely. I think he rather tipped you off to what you should do.”

Gwilym reflected. “In a way, he did.”

Taid laughed.

“It did you more good than if I had taken you along. More of an adventure. I was only half your age when I started on the drom.”

There was a pause.

“So that’s the jockey, eh?” shouted Earl Carramoor, coming at them in a genial bluster. “Where’d they pick him up, Thomas?”

Taid lighted his cigar and tossed the match to the heath.

“My Lord, this is my grandson.”

“Grandson, eh? Well, I’ll be hanged!” droned the Earl, shaking Gwilym’s hand, which was sore by this time. “Looks like a conspiracy. Well, I congratulate both.”

“Thanks,” said Taid. “You lost like a sportsman.”

“That Honor Bright, I’ve a notion to jump her into the lake.”

“I wouldn’t. You may have better luck with her next year.”

When he was gone. Gwilym held up the sack. The weight of it ached his arm.

“What am I going to do with this?”

“Whatever you like.” Taid lifted an eyebrow at Natty. “D’you think he should buy a wardo or a motor-car?”

They both laughed cryptically, then looked at the mob streaming back into the marquee.

“One of your hukkabens, was it?” asked Taid. “I mean, putting on that race before the balloting?”

Natty grunted.

“It was either that or else—”

They went into the marquee, a bit late, for the balloting had already begun, and a dozen hats were going the rounds, with men casting into them scraps of paper folded into triangles. The contents were emptied into a box on the platform. Four young women scrutinized the ballots, then dropped them into separate piles. One was far higher than the rest. Eyes already began to turn upon Thomas Anwyl, the tallest and most noticeable figure in the marquee.

King Pendy stirred in his chair to gaze upon the pile. The youngest woman counted the ballots in that and in the next largest.

“Thomas Anwyl of Moor House Farm,” she declaimed in Rommany. “Anwyl of the Ringos. He be the King of us. For so the chals have cast.”

Anwyl went forward to the platform, and a yell went up, like the voice of one animal. King Pendy greeted him with formality, then pulled off a silver ring and offered it to the new monarch. Anwyl looked at it a moment, then pulled it on his little finger. It was a ritual act, an acceptance of kingship in full view of the crowd.

Cheers rose, and he stilled them with a lift of the hand.

“May I ask for quiet? Thank you. I was offered the kingship because I am a Grymengro. I came here to this Sirnihatch because I know it is not good for Rommanies at this day to change and to cast off their ancient friend, the horse.

“Who throws away a friend throws away much of his soul. Let the Rommany chal keep his grai and the drom, and long will he flourish in this land of the moors.

“The horse and the land have been good to us. So have been the true boro gentlemen, like Earl Carramoor. They know that ‘Sar mushtis aren’t all sin ta rukers’—All men are not like trees. For some it is best to be moving where the spirit leads, like our cousin the wind.”

He paused a while, looking solemnly over the heads of the crowd.

“But some of us,” he resumed, “must keep always rooted, and some care to stir but once, with the coming of the spring. I came. And I was asked to be head of the Gipsies of North Cambria. I am King. A man may leave off being King when he pleases, and it so pleases me now. And I shall name another Rommany chal in my place, and he—”

The pause was like the tense, utter stillness before a thunderclap.

“He shall be a finer Grymengro than myself—that boro Rommany, Natty Ringo!”

The stillness lingered just a second more, then broke with a storming yell and a hundred thunderclaps. Gwilym was dazed. It had all moved so fast. He had won a race and a sack of gold, he had found Taid, seen him made King, seen him abdicate, and beheld Natty, his friend, exalted to that loftiest rank on the drom. Gwilym escaped from the marquee, and sought the golden wardo. Sixpence greeted him joyously, and snuggled against him on the steps.

It was there that Taid and Natty found him an hour afterwards, when the crowd was breaking up camp.

“So we have a new Rommany chal in the family,” said Taid.

“Aye,” said Natty, with a touch to his forelock that seemed a shade too obeisant in a King. “And a good ’un he is; up to trap and he can rakker our lingo as if he had never once left the drom.”

Jubal nodded his head with a smile.

“He’s enough of a Grymengro to be a boro jockey. That right, Mammet?”

“Aye, he’ll do,” said the spokesman of the Lees, with a grin. “And he’ll make a good rat-catcher in a pinch. He’ll not be leaving the drom again?”

“Well, I don’t know,” mused Taid. “I’m a steady-going farmer, myself, and no great hand for roaming about. What should we do with him? Strikes me that since he is part Gorgio, but a greater part Rommany, he can stay in school half the year, and the rest on the drom. I did. And it didn’t do me any harm, neither.”

The caravan was filing out. Jubal sprang handily to the wardo, harnessed the Percherons, tied Tonto on behind, and drove up with a flourish to the party. Then he left to fetch up Twm-Twm and the trap.

“I’m sorry it’s all over so soon,” said Taid. “But I’ve the oatfield to plant. And I’ll be coming along.”

“If you don’t mind,” said Natty, “I’d like the chavo to ride along with me, and we’ll stop in at Gareg Hir on the way to return Tonto with thanks.”

“That’s well,” said Taid. “Gwilym, ride along with His Majesty.”

Gwilym mounted to the wardo box, Natty followed. Jubal, though there was room enough, for Gammer was riding with Mother Chilcott, got into the trap with Taid, and they joined the cavalcade.

The wardo had gone past the end of the lake when a concertino rang out at a distance behind them, with the sound of a voice roaring to the verse of “Hatch till the dood wells apre.”

“I hope your Taid won’t mind Jubal cutting up so, and playing that tune,” said Natty. “He shouldn’t be playing it now.”

“Oh, no, he won’t mind,” Gwilym answered. “That’s Taid singing it.”

“And sings it rather well, too, for a steady-going farmer,” laughed Natty, as he cracked the whip and the wardo sank into the valley and veered into the highway that was the long drom back for Moor House and home.

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

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[The end of *Whistlers' Van* by Idwal Jones]